

**ONLINE HOMELANDS: ISRAELI-PERSIAN IDENTITY BETWEEN THE
ONLINE AND THE OFFLINE**

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I present an ethnographic exploration of how a post-migration community—the Persian community in Israel—constructs its identity. Drawing on cultural and postcolonial theories, I discuss the ways in which the community preserves, negotiates, and resists cultural structures in the Israeli ethnic and national contexts. Through a multi-sited ethnographic exploration, I follow members of the Persian community in Israel, a marginalized ethnic minority, as they construct their national-ethnic identity. Embodying the discord between their two perceived homelands, Israelis of Iranian descent carve themselves an idealized homeland online. In it, they simultaneously resist and re-affirm social structures within and between the two nations and cultures. I focus this exploration on the use of social media, mobile-phone applications, and internet radio for post-migration identity formation. Through this study, I aim to answer a set of questions. Primarily, I attend the question - what is the role of online media platforms in the process of constructing Persian identities in Israel? Some other secondary questions studied in this dissertation are: a) How do community members communicate and articulate the ethnic and national layers of the Persian identity? b) What are the transnational and transcultural aspects of the Persian community and identity as communicated by community members? and c) What is the place of online platforms usage in challenging mainstream notions of ethnicity, nationality, homelands, and host lands?

Through this dissertation, I develop three concepts that contribute to the discussions of new media, culture, identity, migration, and ethnicity. First, I develop the idea of “lived ethnicity,” portraying ethnicity as an evolving and dynamic rather than a static or given identity marker. Looking at practices of “lived ethnicity” within different minority groups (language, collective memory, cuisine, etc.) can allow us a comparative perspective, discussing similarities and differences within specific societies in different times, or between different societies at the same time.

A second concept I coin in this dissertation is “affirmative opposition.” Through this concept, I stress that while some cultural oppositional calls negate negative misconceptions about an oppressed group, they can, in fact, repeat and confirm the social narrative that established the very same oppression. Thus, affirmative opposition is a cultural act that simultaneously opposes and reaffirms existing social structures. The term allows us to critically engage with cultural practices as complex systems of negotiation, looking at the possible oppositional and liberating aspects of oppressive structures, and vice versa, identifying oppressive practices embodied in oppositional acts.

Finally, contributing to new media studies, I coin the third term, “online homeland,” which expands previous notions of media usage in diaspora into digital realms. The online homeland is a notional space that allows communities to negotiate identities and cultures, becoming visible as a community away from the oppressing cultural gaze.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: STUDYING THE PERSIAN COMMUNITY IN ISRAEL

An Iranian Jew received an emigration visa in order to migrate to Israel. Arriving at the airport of Tehran, on his way to Israel, security guards went through his luggage and found a statue of Khomeini. They asked him: "What is this?" The man replied: "You should ask who this is, and not what this is. This man brought the message of Islam to our country. He brought prosperity and success to the Iranian people, and I take it with me as a souvenir." The security guards let the man pass. When he arrived at TLV airport in Israel, security guards went through his luggage and found the statue. They asked him: "What is this?" The man replied: "You should ask who this is, and not what this is. This man is the reason for which I left Iran, after he made millions in his country miserable. I brought it with me so I can curse it every time I come across difficulties." The security guards let the man pass. When he got home, he placed the figurine on a shelf in his library. A few days after arriving, some family members held a welcome party for him at his new home. One of his grandsons saw the statue and asked: "Grandpa, who is this?" He replied: "You should ask what this is and not who this is. These are 10 pounds of pure gold..."

The above quotation is taken from “It means you are Persian”¹ Facebook group, a group of Jewish Israelis of Iranian origin. It was written as a joke and shared by a group member. This anecdote symbolizes the complex and conflicting layers of identity held by Jewish Israelis of Iranian descent. It combines the many aspects that make up the Persian identity of post-migration Jewish Israelis of Iranian origin—religion, ethnicity, and nationality—and reveals that there is more than just one way of framing a specific identity in a specific culture.

In this dissertation, I conduct an ethnographic study that explores how a post-migration community uses online and offline settings to preserve, construct, negotiate and resist their ethnic and national identities. This is done through a multi-sited exploration focused on different online platforms used by members of the Persian community in Israel. I conduct this research aiming to answer a set of questions. Primarily, I attend the question - what is the role of online media platforms in the process of constructing Persian identities in Israel? Some other secondary questions studied in this dissertation are: a) How do community members communicate and articulate the ethnic and national layers of the Persian identity? b) What are the transnational and transcultural aspects of the Persian community and identity as communicated by community members? and c) What is the place of online platforms usage in challenging mainstream notions of ethnicity, nationality, homelands, and host lands?

¹ www.facebook.com/groups/594348647261642/

The case of the Iranian immigration to Israel is a unique case within the research field of immigration and diaspora. In line with the dominant myth, presenting Israel as a ‘promised land’ and a ‘patrimony’ (Yablonka, 1997; Yiftachel & Roded, 2003), the state of Israel is perceived as the homeland of all Jewish Diaspora.² Thus, Jewish immigration blurs the concrete distinction between a host land and a homeland. In addition, the immigrating Persian community has gained, over the last few decades, an additional layer of complexity. In the heart of today’s Israeli-Jewish-Persian identity lays the relationship between Israel and Iran. The rivalry between the two states is often portrayed by global scholars and mass media as heated and dangerous (Parsi, 2007; Jaspal, 2013). Lastly, the Persian community in Israel represents the ethnic cultural structures in Israel, allowing me to explore cultural and social oppression through discussions of their ethnic identity. Thus, the Persian community in Israel needs to reconcile an identity that combines a religious and national Judaism, but at the same time an ethnic Iranian heritage that was, for many years, marginalized in the Israeli context. This sort of identity construction, and especially the process of formulating self-identification as an Israeli-Persian, is an exceptional realm for studying a multi-layered, hybrid, and even conflicting identities formulated via online environments. Understanding the meanings of being Persian in Israel holds, as I show in this dissertation project, political and social implications.

² Jewish Diaspora is often referred to as The Diaspora, hence the capital D. In the current research, due to an extensive use of the term in multiple contexts, I will refer all such cases from now as diaspora, a default term for all views and conceptualizations of diaspora in different contexts.

In this context, two main assumptions form the heart of this research. First, with the proliferation of social networking sites, mobile applications, and the overall shift of online environments from text based internet platforms into immersive virtual worlds, individual media users are able to negotiate and construct identities and cultures that are considered real and continuous to offline settings rather than distinct and synthetic. These changes allow scholars with a glimpse into the ways in which identity markers such as religion, gender, race, etc. are negotiated online. The second assumption is that marginalized groups form cultural enclaves, through media and other means, to escape social, political, and cultural oppressions. In these enclaves, they can negotiate belonging and celebrate self-constructed identities and cultures away from the dominant mainstream culture in which they are marginalized.

Tying these two assumptions together, I focus on the roles online environments play in the lives of the Persian community in Israel. I argue that through online media, members of the community are able to partake in cultural and political discussions that were fairly closed for them thus far. In them, they are re-formulating an ethnic identity that was, for many years, oppressed in the Israeli society. They are also able to negate and re-construct their national identity, moving themselves from the margins of society into the center of dominant national and cultural narratives in the Israeli civic society. Finally, via online media users take part in building transnational and transcultural bridges between Iran and Israel, facilitating a civic dialogue that at times transcends the diplomatic clash between the states, and at time rearticulates it.

Contextualizing My Ethnographic Work

My interest in the life stories of Jewish migrants to Israel has emerged long before I started working on this dissertation project. Coming from a family of immigrants, and growing up in a society that was/is constantly shaped by massive waves of migration; studying the relations of media and immigration seemed instinctive to me. In my MA thesis entitled “‘As birds returning to their nests’ – The Representation of Jewish Immigrants and Immigration in 1950s Children’s Magazines” I explored the construction of Jewish national identity through the coverage of immigrants and immigration in 1950s Israeli children’s magazines. I focused on the narratives depicting migration to Israel and the migrants themselves. The study discussed the sharp contrast between the positive presentation of Jewish immigration to Israel as a fulfillment of a prophecy and the negative depiction of immigrants themselves as primitive “others,” lacking ideological commitment to the young state. I highlighted the ways in which journalists and state leaders used the image of the immigrant as a social tool for collective self-definition, illuminating the reciprocal relationships between culture and journalistic practices (Yadlin, 2012; Yadlin-Segal & Meyers, 2014).

Since that project, I have been immersed in the field of migration and media studies, focusing on the criticism of mainstream media’s negative depictions of migrants. In this dissertation project, I expand the breadth of my knowledge, focusing on the self-presentation and processes of self-identity formation presented by post-migration community online. As I am writing this dissertation, almost no research was found on

the topic of Jewish-Iranian immigrants' usage of online platforms in Israel or on ethnic media and homeland media consumption. I wish to position this study within said gap, aiming to investigate the use of online platforms for the formulation of a Persian Identity by Jewish-Iranian immigrants and their families in Israel.

While focusing on media produced or circulated by members of a post-migration community rather than by mainstream media outlets, I focus on the gap between the “ideal” and the “real,” between the Zionist image of migration and the life of migrants themselves. The ethnographic work conducted for this dissertation allows me to bring forward participants' voices and points of view about complex narratives of migration, estrangement, and belonging. To engage these topics, I provide in the following paragraphs a brief review of Iranian migration processes to Israel, and media representation patterns of the Persian community.

Iranian Migration to Israel

Two main issues should be considered while addressing the process of Jewish-Iranian immigration to Israel. First, the Persian community in Israel is not a homogenous group. The members of this community differ in geographical area of origin within Iran (big cities or rural villages for example), in socio-economic status prior to departure, in period of migration (before the establishment of the state of Israel or after, before the Islamic revolution in Iran or after), and in socio-economic status in Israel (such as occupation, income, and level of education). Second, the assimilation process of the

Persian migrants in Israel, as well as the Israeli society's attitudes towards different waves of Iranian immigration varies. Thus, when presenting the process of immigration to and assimilation in the state of Israel, there is a need to depict possible cultural and social nuances within the Persian community. In the same vein, the users of the different platforms studied in this dissertation vary in their background. They might share the online space and a sense of identity, but they come from diverse backgrounds within the Israeli society, with multiple media usage patterns and aims that might transcend this research project. Hence, a review of Iranian migration to Israel is needed.

In the early 20th century, around 1903-1907, small and sporadic waves of a few thousand Jewish-Iranians immigrated to what was then a territory of the Ottoman Empire, an area that eventually became part of modern-day Israel. Central to these immigration waves was the *Mashhadi* community (Iranians from the city of Mashhad in Iran) that settled in an area known today as central Israel. The *Mashhadi* are considered a wealthy group that was persecuted for their Jewish religion in Iran. While many members of the community supported and assisted with later Iranian migration waves to Israel, the community did not mix with the later immigrating Iranian communities in Israel (Yerushalmi, 2010; Nettl & Shiloah, 1986). In 1917, the Balfour Declaration (in which the British government declared endorsement over the establishment of a national home for Jewish people in Palestine) generated additional waves of Iranian immigration to Israel.

Between 1917 and 1948, about 3,600 documented Jewish-Iranians immigrated to Israel, most of them settled in Jerusalem. The actual number is arguably higher due to

undocumented immigration that occurred during these years (Netzer, 1979; Yerushalmi, 2010). On the eve of establishing the State of Israel, about 20,000 to 30,000 Jews of Iranian origin (immigrants and their offspring) lived in Israel, mainly in urban areas (Yerushalmi, 2010). According to the Israeli Bureau of Statistics, between 1948 and 2010, more than 80,000 Iranians have immigrated to Israel. Persian community members estimate that the community has doubled in number since 1948, with approximately 250,000 Israelis of Iranian origin living in Israel today (RadisIn, n.d).

The 1950s were the first years after the establishment of Israel, in which the Jewish-national leadership in Israel held full control over the volume and assimilation patterns of Jewish immigrants (Yadlin-Segal & Meyers, 2014). The Iranian immigrants of the 1950s were included under the “*Mizrahim*” (Mizrahi Jews, Hebrew for – eastern) ethnic category, and were perceived as inferior to the absorbing veteran Israeli society (Ram, 2008). The Mizrahi ethnic group is the Israeli term for “Oriental” Jews, hailing mostly from Arab or Muslim countries in the Asian and African continents (Zur, 2003). Often overlapping in definition and origin with the Sephardic Jewry (Jews of Spain, hailing from around the Iberian Peninsula) and the Maghrebi Jewry (of the north-African areas) Mizrahi Jews were portrayed as the direct opposite of the Ashkenazi ethnic group originated in Western Europe cultures and nations.

The two allegedly distinct groups became the social hierarchical terminology within the Israeli society, presented by critical scholars as one Israeli manifestation of cultural imperialism and orientalism (Shavit, 2003), an approach I will further explore in this dissertation through discussion of postcolonial thought and media usage. This

outlook partially resulted from the religious nature of the immigrant's state of origin. Immigrants arriving from Arab and/or Muslim countries, among them some particular waves of Jewish-Iranians, were perceived to hold "oriental" and "primitive" lifestyle, which was considered inferior in comparison to European immigrants and the absorbing Israeli society (Lissak, 1987; Shenhav, 2006). Thus, many see Israeli Mizrahi migrants as culturally colonized subjects with identity formed around European-centered oppression and marginalization (Boyarin, 1997; Shenhav & Hever, 2002a; Shenhav & Hever, 2002b).

On the one hand, Jewish migration – *Aliyah* (Hebrew for 'ascending') – ideologically positions Israel as a safe haven for persecuted Jews, a 'promised land' and a 'patrimony' (Yablonka, 1997; Yiftachel & Roded, 2003). On the other hand, during the 1950s many Iranians that did wish to immigrate to Israel were declined. Under a classification system that is known as the "selective immigration," Israeli immigration officials approved the immigration of Jewish people that seemed fit, healthy, and motivated in regards to the Zionist goals. The negative stereotypes associated with the Mizrahi community, and the Iranian-Jews as part of them, led to the rejection of immigrants that were seen as unable to advance the objective of building a strong nation (Picar, 1999).

Attention should also be given to the use of the term "*Mizrahim*." The closest Hebrew translation to the word ethnicity is "*Eda*." The two do not exactly stand for the same idea, but, as Moreno (2014) argues:

[it] is remarkable how the common translation of ethnicity into modern Israeli Hebrew “*eda*,” denoted only the Mizrahi subset of Israeli immigrant society, leaving the non-Mizrahi community unspecified, as if it constituted the norm. Linguistically, there exist “*edot hamizrah*,” [plural for *eda*] but not “*edot hama’arav*” (Eastern ethnicities, but not Western ethnicities). The conscious or unconscious choice of a variety of scholars, including some postcolonialists, to stick to the nickname “Mizrahim” when referring to olim from Morocco (which is, in fact, situated in the West in relation to Israel), reflected some echoes of Eurocentric perceptions of modernization within the common discourse. By means of this terminology, Morocco and its immigrants represented the East, as a concept, in this migratory passage from traditional ethnicity to absorption in Israel’s modern society. In this dissertation, I seek to employ the term as a discursive, rather than an analytic category (pp. 26-27).

Similarly, for the lack of other terms that highlight the social hierarchy and oppressions experienced in the Israeli context, I use the term to denote a discursive category rather than an ethnic perception.

Goldstein (1985) argues that within the Mizrahi community, Iranian immigrants maintained a relative low ethnic profile and have been less subsumed under the negatively characterized group. Upon arrival, the 1950s Iranian immigrants were stigmatized in regards to their social qualities (Massad, 1996; Shohat, 1999; 1997); however, following Persian immigration waves received a somewhat different attention.

Due to modernization processes undertaken in Iran, Jewish-Iranians living under the last governing Pahlavi Shah, Muhammad Reza, were imagined as relatively less “Oriental” than Iranian immigrants emigrating under Muslim ruling in Iran (Ram, 2008, p. 2). Ram (2008) argues that the Israeli society saw them as much more modernized and westernized than Jewish people emigrating from Iran over the early 1950s. The close ties between the Iranian Shah and the Israeli government helped to further establish this approach, as Iran was portrayed in the Israeli public opinion as a legitimate ally (Menshari, 2010; Litvak, 2006). These changes in perception, however, were not documented in studies of Israeli mainstream media.

With the occurrences of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the “diaspora in exile” myth was employed once again to describe the Jewish community in Iran (Ram, 2008). Although once viewed as more western and modernized; the Iranian immigrants were now (that is, after the revolution) perceived as immersed in exile under Muslim oppression and suffering. Regardless of questions of accuracy related to such narratives, the occurrences of the revolution have once again enabled the Israeli society to portray itself as the redemption of all exiled Jews in diaspora. Within this narrative, Mizrahi Jews are deemed lesser in education, social integrity, and ideological conviction than the Ashkenazi Jews. These attitudes were also visible in the media representations of the Mizrahi group in Israel, as discussed in the following section.

Media Representation of the Israeli Mizrahi Group

Representation of the Mizrahi group in early Israeli mainstream media (Israeli print for example) expressed reservations in regards to their social abilities, portraying them as unable to assist in the physical and educational aspects of building a nation state (Lissak, 1987). Children's magazines of the 1950s associated these immigrants with passivity, lack of ideology, and uncleanness (Yadlin-Segal & Meyers, 2014), while other media outlets of that era depicted members of the Mizrahi group as poor, unemployed, and even as criminals (Shiran, 2001). Although Mizrahi groups went through critical ethnic awakening during the 1970s, mass media portrayal of this community maintained its negative depictions. On the one hand, during the 1970s, Mizrahi groups established the Israeli Black Panthers (drawing on U.S. race relations) to "politicize ethnic tensions within the Jewish population of Israel" (Frankel, 2008, p. 10). On the other hand, Israeli cinema of the 1970s and 1980s preserved the early stereotypical representation of Mizrahi community as the "oriental" and the "other" (Shohat, 2005). Even during the 1990s and 2000s Mizrahi groups were illustrated in news and prime time television as remote from centers of cultural, economic, and social power, often in contexts of disorder and turmoil (Laor, Elefant-Lafar, Avraham & First, 2005).

The representation of immigrants as a whole, and immigrating *Mizrahim* in particular, was constructed in comparison to the image of the *Sabar*, or in English, Sabra, the ideal figure of devotion and sacrifice built by the Zionist movement. The Israeli journalist Uri Kesari coined the term Sabra in a 1931 *Doar HaYom* newspaper

article (Shait, 2005; Almog, 1997). The term refers to the generation born in the period between World War I and the 1960s. The group includes members that were either natively born in Israel or immigrated to Israel in a very early age and underwent a full socialization process of absolute assimilation in Israeli culture through Zionist institutions in Israel. Such institutions included agricultural youth villages, youth movements, the pre-state *Palmach* (fighting force of the Jewish community during the period of the British Mandate for Palestine) and post-state establishment *Nahal* (Fighting Pioneer Youth). These were coupled with living in the *Kibbutz* (communal living setting), workers' settlements, and formal Zionist education institutions (Shapira, 1997; Almog, 1997). The Sabra, his devotion to the state, and his way of living, became the symbol of the Israeli melting pot, calling all Jewish Israelis to abandon their past and become the new Israeli Jew.

Although the members of this Sabra group did not necessarily share a past or a vision of the present (ideological differences existed even within the labor movement), many collective characteristics were attributed to them. The name, Sabra, refers to the *Opuntia* cactus (in Hebrew—*Sabar*) a desert plant found wild in many areas of Israel. This cactus is able to survive harsh climate, thorny and tenacious on the outer layer, but soft and delicate inside. The Sabra was portrayed as a robust worker of the land, with fluttering thick hair and sunburned skin. His clothes were modest and his temper was brusque. He spoke Hebrew and had a strong secular-social commitment to the Jewish state and state-members. This character was built as part of the Zionist movement's wish to shake off the diasporic image of the Jew, dwelling amongst hostile strangers. Thus,

the Sabra was the heroic son of Israel, the New Jew, symbolizing the ideological way of living, the activeness, and the courage his exiled brothers and sisters were lacking of. The Sabra became a key, yet imagined, social agent in the Israeli society, playing a central role in socialization processes for decades (Schweid, 1984; Raz-Krakotzkin, 1993).

This social construction of the Sabra requires a brief discussion of the Israeli melting pot. Early post-state establishment Israeli leadership formulated the ideology of the Israeli melting pot in light of the Jewish secular socialist movement. This problematic concept—melting pot—became the official ideology and government policy during the first decades of the Israeli state (Gutwein, 2004). The paternalistic and oppressive melting pot attitude of the assimilating society asked to weaken any non-European, highly diasporic, and religious cultural expressions in the name of creating a new Hebrew Zionist society and citizens. The mass migration experienced in Israel during these years led the political and educational leadership to believe that only state intervention could lead to the establishment of a strong independent state. In late 1950, merely a decade after the establishment of Israel, the Israeli society more than tripled its size through migration waves arriving from around the globe. To ensure that all citizens share an ideology (that is, a Zionist ideology) government policies initiated from above started taking shape through different socialization agencies—media, education, youth movements, the army, and the like (Yadlin-Segal & Meyers, 2014).

The influence of postmodern times did not skip the image of the Sabra or the Israeli melting pot project. In the 1980s, the multicultural ideology appeared in the

Israeli discourse as a vocal post-Zionist; academic criticism. “The multicultural movement,” argues Gutwein (2014)

spoke against the ideology of the melting pot on the grounds that it served as a justification of erasing the identity of different groups—especially the Mizrahi Jews, but also Holocaust survivors, Yiddish-speaking communities, religious groups and others—as a tool of subordination to Ashkenazi-Zionist hegemony led by the labor movement.

Yet, Gutwein, as well as other scholars such as Yona and Shenhav (2000), point at the inner-conflict of arguing for multiculturalism in Israel. While multicultural approaches were necessary for the liberation of subaltern groups in Israel, multiculturalism often served as a promotional tool for privatization processes in the Israeli society, further aggravating the cultural and economic inequality it originally opposed. Opening the Israeli society, economy, education, etc. to an alleged multicultural “open market” de facto intensified the gaps and schisms between ethnic groups in Israel rather than brought them together.

When it comes to the image of the Zionist “wonder boy,” the Sabra, it is argued that in many ways the image of the native-Israeli has change into the post-Sabra, the Israeli Yuppie or the Nouveau riche. In comparison to the older Sabra, the Yuppie and Nouveau riche are more inclined to the material pleasures of life, holding a global nature of living, working, and consuming. Online communication and internet based media play a central role in the creation of the post-Sabra image, connecting the Israeli locality with worldwide high-tech centers and the global class of Yuppies. With geeks and

hackers gaining more and more traction in today's culture, and metro-sexual muscular images filling fashion magazines, undermining the place of the ideological Sabra (Almog & Blais, 2008). Yet, it is hard to claim that a figure that has been so fundamental in the Israeli society has completely disappeared from Israeli cultural and political discourses. The case of identity construction processes in the Israeli context begs paying attention to the ways in which the iconic image of the Sabra is used. The topic is emphasized in this dissertation in the analysis of the ethnic schism in Israel between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi groups as portrayed by members of the Persian community.

The dominant narratives presented thus far lack the perspective of the represented. While much is known about the ways in which hegemonic Israeli groups portrayed ethnic minorities in media, less attention was given to the way in which minorities portrayed themselves in the Israeli context.

The current study is situated within this gap, and attempts to investigate the ways in which members of the Persian community discuss and portray their ethnic and national identity in light of the movement between Israel and Iran. Goldstein (1985) addressed an offline means through which Israelis of Iranian origin preserved their culture in Israel. Studying the Iranian culture in Israel, Goldstein presented the social use of "definitional ceremonies" to perform a Persian identity. Through definitional ceremonies—conferences, weekend retreats, and live shows—Israeli Iranians created activities that answered a need of connection to their past, to formulate Iranian ethnic context for the young members of the community in Israel, and to provide local identification source for newer immigrants.

The use of these ceremonies united Israeli Jewish-Iranians that held varying definitions of self, different pasts, different birth regions in Iran, different immigration periods, and different interests in the present. Goldstein conceptualized the “definitional ceremonies” as the meeting place of culture and identity, an act through which Iranians in Israel became visible to themselves as an ethnic group. These “definitional ceremonies” created a liminal place for a Persian identification, imagined and actual at once. However helpful these “definitional ceremonies” were for the community, they still mark a liminal space, and not a day-to-day routine of ethnic identification. They were arranged apart from the day-to-day lives of the Persian community in Israel, and represented a “break” from the routine that allowed ethnic identification.

In the current study, I wish to further the discussion of ethnic identity construction, and to address means of identity construction through more lived, everyday acts of media usage. Instead of occasional gatherings outside the daily routine, online platforms, as further discussed in the next chapter, became inseparable of day-to-day lives, and are argued to be spheres of identity construction that intertwine online and offline experiences. Therefore, this study focuses on three online platforms—Facebook, online radio, and instant messaging mobile apps—that allow the active participation of the Persian community in the day-to-day formation of their Persian identity.

Structure of the Dissertation

Addressing the Jewish-Persian identity construction in Israel, this research concentrates on several issues. The following chapter (Chapter II) reviews the main concepts and theories used in the dissertation. It opens with an attempt to define identity as a whole, and the national and ethnic identities in the context of migration in particular, as a research locus. This review is followed by a discussion of new, online spheres of identity construction. These are grounded within studies of migration and media, as well as studies of national and ethnic identity construction. Focusing on collective identities—national and ethnic—the issue of identity construction online is further grounded in this section within studies of community formation online. This is done to understand the importance of communities for the issues of communicating identity online.

The review then turns to discussing the construction of social and cultural enclaves by minority and marginalized groups. This discussion address both online and offline usage of media for the construction of enclaves as spaces of discursive change and liberation of minorities. Drawing on existing literature, I address online media usage of the Persian community as an enclaved usage that simultaneously makes them invisible from the mainstream public eye but visible to themselves as a public of interest. In this section I also address three theories that focus on the relationship between society and media technologies. I do this to further contextualize the nuanced analysis of cultural and social marginalization and the way it both informs and being informed by media usage. The theories discussed in this section are Social Shaping of Technology

(Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1999), Mediatization (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby, 2015), and Participatory Culture (Jenkins, 2006).

Following the conceptual and theoretical review, I turn to theoretically contextualize this dissertation project. I draw on two main theoretical frameworks, namely cultural approaches to media studies and postcolonial thought, to discuss processes of identity construction. By using Carey's (1989) cultural approach to media studies, I focus on the ritualistic usage of media outlets, primarily online ones, and the new place of media users in the negotiation and construction of national identities. To complement this discussion, I also refer to Anderson's (1983/2006) discussion of the "imagined community" and the census, map, and the museum as examples of tools designed to create a sense of shared identity within a society, generating a sense of belonging. I also refer to Appadurai's (1991, 1996) "community of sentiment," to stress the community connection between an individual's identity with a larger community, stressing the constructivist cultural aspects of the homeland sentiment of groups in diaspora.

These theories are coupled with postcolonial approaches to stress the agency and constraints of individuals in the processes of identification. Focusing on practices of cultural oppressions, I draw on postcolonial thought to address the cultural opportunities postcolonial subjects experience through online media, and the possible reproduction of oppression enabled by them. Through the use of postcolonial theory, I highlight the conflicting messages and sources of identification characterizing cultural affiliations of migrating communities.

The theoretical discussion is followed by a review of the data collection and analysis methods presented in Chapter III. This section consists of two parts. First, I review literature relevant to digital qualitative research, focusing on the expansion of qualitative research to digital media and online environments. It is followed by an in-depth discussion of expanding ethnographic research from the offline to the online. As part of this review, I present the applications and limitations of online ethnographic research, issues of participant observation in non-avatar based online environments, and triangulation of data collected online and offline. I then turn to present online ethnography as a multi-sited project.

Drawing on Marcus' (1998) conception of the multi-sited ethnography, I reflect on the complex and intertwined online-offline media experience of media users today. I stress the need to investigate shifting practices within and between multiple environments we inhabit online and offline. Here I also reflect upon the place of the user as a consumer and a producer of media content, and the new considerations this dual position requires from media ethnographers, thus far somewhat distinguishing between media producers and consumers. The ethical considerations for conducting online ethnographies close this part of the chapter. The second part of the methods chapter deals with the methodological application of online ethnography in this dissertation. I create an in-depth discussion of practicing ethnography in the Persian-Israeli community, framing the analysis and finding chapters that follow.

Chapter IV focuses on the ethnic identity re-constructed by members of the Persian community in Israel. I endeavor to contextualize the Persian identity in social

and cultural circles relevant to the construction process. I open the chapter with stories of migration and assimilation shared by participants online and offline. This is done to understand the overall sense of alienation expressed by community members, stressing the prominence of online platforms in the process of Persian identity construction in Israel. I then turn to unpack the meaning of using online media in light of these stories. I draw on analyzed data to discuss the different themes that build the ethnic Persian identity in Israel, ranging from the Persian calendar, through the Persian cuisine, all the way to hybrid media texts produced and consumed locally and globally. The analysis portion of the chapter closes with a discussion of the culturally subversive vs. affirmative nature of the discourse produced by community members. Based on these findings, I developed the concept I coined, “lived ethnicity.” I draw on the terms “ethnicity in motion” (Moreno, 2015) and “lived religion” (Ammerman, 2006) to explain how ethnic identities function as an interpretive framework for every-day practices, but are simultaneously informed by these same practices.

Following the analysis of the ethnic facet of the Persian identity, Chapter V turns to discuss the construction of nationality, or nationalities, as presented by community members. Here I focus on the construction of a Jewish national identity by members of the Persian community as it relates to the Persian ethnic identity. To do so, I highlight the complex relationship between nationality and ethnicity, showing that while members work to formulate a space that includes and respects their ethnic identification, they also include some mainstream notions of Jewish nationality in it. At the same time, I present the ways in which members create a dual nationality, constructing their sense of

belonging both in the Jewish nationality and Israeli society as well as in the Iranian nation. I endeavor to theorize this coupling of conflicting narratives (i.e. resistance and embracement) through coining the term “affirmative opposition,” describing how members of the Persian community reaffirm existing social and cultural structures through acts of opposition.

Chapter VI details the ways in which members of the Persian community in Israel take part in Israeli diplomatic efforts through a self-proclaimed role of circulating Israeli *Hasbara* (diplomacy) online. Alongside constructing a cultural identity that brings together multiple conflicting identity markers, members work to construct spheres within which they transcend offline cultural and political limitations, creating new online spheres that position the Persian community as a central political player within the Israeli-Iranian conflict. Broadly defined as Israeli public diplomacy, *Hasbara* becomes a means for the Persian community to create and maintain relations with other Persians worldwide, creating cultural bridges with communities inside and outside of Iran. Analyzing the ways in which Israeli military and diplomatic goals are weaved into the cultural practices of the Persian community in Israel, I discuss the creating of a new sphere of communication in which the private and the public are blurred. Here I also focus on the cultural bridges established by community members between Iran and Israel via online media.

Drawing on Chapters IV through VI, I discuss the conclusions of the dissertation in Chapter VII. In this chapter, I present the conceptual and theoretical contributions to the study of diaspora communities and media in the context of postcolonial approaches.

Namely, I address the changing nature of the Jewish narrative of “returning to a homeland,” drawing on participants’ stories to position Israel itself as a diaspora. Moreover, I stress how minority groups construct colonial subjects (other than them) even outside of established colonizing discourses. I conclude the dissertation by discussing the term “online homelands.” Expanding previous notions of media usage in diaspora into digital realms, I contribute to the field of new media studies, specifically in the context of new media and migration.

CHAPTER II

IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES, MIGRATION, AND MEDIA

In this conceptual chapter, I discuss the role of online media in enabling processes of identity construction. I open the discussion with an attempt to define identity as the focal point of this dissertation. First, I present broader approaches to the concept, and then turn to discuss identity construction in spaces of contention. I highlight the specific case of ethnic and national identities, contemplating the overlapping areas between the two while addressing the Persian identity in Israel and Iran. The issue of post-migration identity construction is also discussed. This section highlights identities as a whole, and the Persian identity analyzed in this study in particular, as constructed, fluid, fragmented, reflexive, and narrative based social artifacts. I stress in this chapter, that identities bring together multiple, often overlapping, social and cultural markers (such as gender, religion, race, nationality, etc.) and involve constant reflection and reconstruction.

Second, I address the issue of identity construction in online environments. In this section, I follow the evolution of studying and approaching identities in online/virtual environments from the 1980s until our days. The main argument being made in these paragraphs is that while in the past online constructed identities were approached as detached from offline identities, inauthentic or falsified, we are now at a point in which online and offline identities are intertwined. They are viewed indexical to each other, carried simultaneously via multiple online and offline platforms. Following this section, I situate the discussion of online identity construction within approaches to

online and virtual communities' formation. Arguing in earlier sections of this chapter that identities are social and communal, the discussion of community formation online is integral to this dissertation and is necessary for the understanding of identity construction and research in online platforms. This section also reviews the creation of enclave media spaces by marginalized groups, further engaging with processes of community building and identity formation by minority groups. In this section I also address three theories that focus on the relationship between society and media technologies. These are Social Shaping of Technology (Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1999), Mediatization (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby, 2015), and Participatory Culture (Jenkins, 2006). This is done to further position the case of minority groups' media usage, and engages the question - is it media and communication technology that shapes society or is it society that shapes advances in media technologies alongside changes in media design and use?

The fourth section of this chapter addresses the issue of migration and diasporic identities. Here attention is given to the concepts of host lands and homelands, developing the grounds for a later discussion of the blurring line between the two in the case of the Jewish identity. In the fifth section of the chapter, I review central literature connecting the concepts host lands and homelands with media studies. These include Appadurai's (1990, 1996) "community of sentiment," Anderson's (1983/2006) "imagined community," and Carey's (1989) cultural approach for studying media as a ritual. Finally, these concepts and theories are further unpacked through a review of the postcolonial approach. By examining the case of constructing Persian identity in Israel

via online and offline environments, I wish to expand and add to these concepts and theories, developing in later chapters of this dissertation the concept “online homeland.”

Defining Identity

Focusing on identity construction via online environments, this chapter opens with a discussion of identity as a research locus. The main difficulty with studying identity is that “different disciplines use the word to mean very different things” (Childs, 2011, p. 14). Hence, a clear definition of what identity means in this study and the kinds of identities this study looks at is needed. In the following paragraphs, I bring forward four relevant features for studying identities in the context of this dissertation. Through this review, I argue that identities are collective, constructed, narrative based, and reflexive.

Collective Identities and Identity Construction

First and foremost, formulating identity is viewed in this study as a social process. Two main assumptions lay in this context: the first is that identity is collective, formed in relations to existing or imagined communities. It is an individual’s conceptualization of self through interaction with larger social groups. The second is that identity is constructed rather than inherent and essential. “Social identity,” as Goffman (1963) defines it, is performed based on a person’s understanding of her/his place in society, and the characteristics they associate with their self. This does not mean that an

individual's presentation of self or identity is not sincere. Rather, identity is enacted, constantly negotiated, and re-constructed against social settings (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 2000).

Thus, identity is often built in terms of sharing personal characteristics with others, and being a part of an existing social collective. According to Hall, identity formation, or "identification," is the never-ending process of articulating an allegiance and solidarity with an establish group. Established groups can always change, be re-formulated, or even be abandoned. Such identification is performed not only through recognizing the similarities one shares with a group, but also through the differences one holds from the "other" (Hall, 2000) or the "out group" (Goffman, 1963).

The two main identity markers I focus on in this study are ethnicity and nationality. Ethnicity is viewed as a "collective identity and solidarity based on such factors as real or alleged common descent, language, customs, belief systems and practices (religion), and... even though physical features of people, such as skin, colour or simply racial characteristics, also contribute to ethnicity and ethnic identity, culture remains still the primary and essential determinant of ethnic formation" (Amanolahi, 2005; p. 38). Thus, ethnicity is framed as a construction or an instrument built on some shared, biological or not, characteristics. According to Varshney (2007), ethnicity is often utilized for galvanizing collective identity and can be used to construct a shared sense of community on a local, regional, or national level. In the humanities and social sciences, ethnicity became one of these concepts holding variety of definitions, often even conflicting ones.

The term “ethnicity” according to Hall (1996), “acknowledges the place of history language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity” (p. 446). Hall signals ethnicity as a means for marking differences between distinct ethnic groups. Positioned in the context of nationality, ethnicity has been used both for the construction of a shared sense of national cohesion, but at the same time further marked social differences, conflicts, and hierarchies within nation-states. Thus, individuals might share the same nationality, but associate with different ethnic groups (U.S. citizens of Latin or Caucasian ethnicities, as used by American census for example). At the same time, individuals that share an ethnic identity can be a part of different nationalities (for example – the Basques in France and Spain). In this context, nationality is defined as a social order or an ideology which renders the nation-state justifiable (Deutsch, 1953). Just like ethnicity, it might be based on engendered characteristics such as religion, geographical territory, or on imagined shared political or cultural past and present (Smith, 1986; Anderson, 1983/2006). Ethnic and national identities are thus often hard to distinguish from each other.

Acknowledging cases in which ethnicity and nationality overlap in definition, Varshney (2007) highlights the difference between the two: an ethnic group might exist without a state of its own, and a nation implies bringing ethnicity and statehood together (although, as mentioned, a nation-state might consist of more than just one ethnicity). The ethnic-Persian identity, on which this study focuses, further problematizes these already convoluted distinctions. During the Pahlavi era (1920s-late 1970s), the Iranian monarchy used ethnic-Persian descriptors (language, calendar, and European roots for

example) as a way to distance Iran from regional, Muslim-religious, and pan-Arab identities (Marashi, 2008; Mirsepassi, 2000; Ansari, 2006). However, in the contemporary Iranian context, the meaning of the term has shifted, as being Persian is a religious-centered ethnic identification. As “Persians” in Iran are nationally Iranian and mostly religiously Muslim (Shia). Thus, religious Jewish minorities in Iran today are not included under the definition of being Persian (Amanolahi, 2005).

In Israel, however, some of the Jewish-Iranian immigrants define themselves as Persians, emphasizing their ethnic heritage alongside national identity (Jewish), religious identity (Jewish), and citizenship (Israeli). In some cases, being Jewish is also considered as an ethnic identity marker in of its own, one that further complicates the mentioned overlap between nationality and ethnicity. This is not to say, however, that all Jewish immigrants from Iran are necessarily Persians. Other Jewish ethnic minorities populate Iran. The Jewish Kurds and Kalimis, for example, are two Jewish communities in Iran that do not necessarily identify ethnically as Persians. These two ethnic-religious minority groups from Iran represent the fragmentation of the Jewish community in Iran. In Israel, additional factors further complex the discussion of ethnicity and nationality. Citizenship is a prime example of such complexity.

Understanding the distinction between citizenship and nationality is important in the case of this dissertation project. Unlike the U.S., in which nationality and citizenship are coupled (being American is both a nationality and citizenship, regardless of one’s religious or ethnic background), in Israel nationality and citizenship are separate. While most Israelis (based on birth, descent, residence, marriage, or naturalization) qualify as

citizens of Israel (keeping in mind that the discussion of what constitutes as Israel is of importance, but will not be included in this dissertation), the state is defined as a Jewish nation. Under this approach, citizens' nationality is not equal to their citizenship. One can be, for example, Israeli-Jew or Israeli-Arab. This is confusing as the Jewish and Arab national identities are based on religious and ethnic definitions and identifications. An Arab-Israeli will most likely be Muslim or Christian in religion. But, if a Jewish individual immigrates to Israel from an Arab state, Iraq for example, they will be considered Jewish in their nationality once becoming Israeli citizens, based on the law of return (further discussed in later sections of this chapter).

This convoluted issue requires an understanding of what the state of Israel puts forward as one's main identity marker. Yes, this is discriminatory and highly subjective. The topic is important to understand as I aim at unpacking both ethnic and national identity construction processes. Thus, when I address national identity rather than citizenship, I stress that participants in this study address being Israeli and Jewish, part of a national group, rather than just Israeli, as an all-inclusive, integrated, and multicultural identification of all members of the Israeli society. Participants in this study are those who identify themselves as Persians through a post-migration identity construction process in Israel, and prioritize national Jewish identification when referring to Israel and to being Israeli. This is not unique to the Persian community, and has been found as the default reference addressing the Israeli society from a Jewish-national point of view (Yiftachel & Roded, 2003). Participants in this study are Israeli citizens and Jewish in their nationality. They view themselves as Persian, and based on

this self-identification I study in this dissertation the different meanings and roles online environments play in this identification process. It just might be that some of the participants further conflate Persian ethnicity with other ethnic descriptors or markers that are not considered Persian in Iran (such as being Kurd). Thus, while migrating to Israel from the same place of origin – Iran – under the same religious identification – Jewish – some Iranian-Jewish migrants to Israel might hold ethnic heritage that is not Persian.

This complex Persian identity, as it is experienced by Israelis of Iranian origins, amalgamates conflicting religious, national, and ethnic sources and emphasizes the changing nature of identity in the context of migration. Therefore, in this study I address the Persian identity as a cultural identity, one that encompasses multiple intersecting identities in a specific locality. Cultural identity (rather than solely religious, ethnic, or national) reveals that identity markers cannot be easily divided, and are often gathered into one identity that encompasses different descriptors for different people. The process of constructing this identity is the center of this study.

As discussed thus far, identities are viewed in this dissertation as social and collective. I now turn to discuss an additional feature of identities, which is the issue of construction. Granted, both ethnicity and nationality can be viewed as essential markers, organic and inherent to one's identity. Studying ethnic and national identities from an essentialist perspective means assuming that identities grow organically based on shared primordial essence. The primordialism of shared ethnic ancestry, geographic location, or blood-line, serves as a strong mechanism for the formation of national and ethnic

identity (or national conflict, depending on the situation and the locality) (Varshney, 2007). Constructivism, in contrast to primordialism, views ethnicity and nationality as modern frameworks that extend localities and regions by the creation of a shared identity, and is the line of thought utilized in this study. Scholars prone to this approach emphasize the invented and imagined aspects of ethnicity and nationality as modern identity markers, connecting masses of individuals through language, symbols, and mass media (Hobsbawm, 1983; Anderson, 1983/2006; Billig, 1995).

Constructivist approaches are highly relevant to studying both Jewish nationality and Persian ethnicity. In the case of the Jewish nationality, it is argued that the Zionist movement emerged during the late 19th century as a hybrid of ethnic ancestry (biblical narratives) and social construction. Jewish nationality relied (and still does to a large extent) on a contemporary reading of ancient symbols and history, creating an identity that transcends the different localities, variety of languages, and host of political views Jewish people held in diaspora (Dahan & Wasserman, 2006; Ram, 2006). In this context, biblical narratives of “returning to a homeland” and to a “patrimony,” alongside other political issues, enabled the revival of the Jewish state in Israel (Yadlin-Segal & Meyers, 2014). In a very similar way, Persian-ethnic identity markers were used for the construction of Iranian national identity. By stressing Iran’s Persian heritage—both through references to its Aryan background and to its secular history in Iran—different Iranian leaders have invoked a vivid abstraction of the nation-state (Marashi, 2008). Thus, for example, in October 1971, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi staged an official celebration marking the twenty-five-hundredth anniversary of Cyrus, the founding of the

Persian Empire. Using ethnic heritage, the Shah attempted to create shared national language and experiences for citizen to draw on and identify with (Chehabi, 1993; Marashi, 2008). Such constructivist approach is chief to this study, stressing that identity is in constant flux, negotiated by individuals and groups, filling the role of a social gatherer.

Narratives and Reflexivity in Identity Construction

Social identities (Goffman, 1963) are not only collective and constructed (Hall, 2000; Cerulo, 1997). They are also considered as reflexive and narrative based. According to Giddens (1991) self-actualization—the defining of one’s self—is based on a dialogue with a social group’s present, past, and anticipated future. This means that identities are formulated through narratives and stories, which are told, negotiated, and made explicit through different methods. Central outlets to these narratives are mass media outlets such as television, film, and radio. Providing media audiences a repertoire of shared symbols for identity constructions, media outlets became a place for cultural gathering, a ritual, or the modern campfire around which community members meet (Carey, 1989). Online media, as will be discussed further in later sections of this study, make these processes not only more available for users (via blogging, photo sharing applications, social networking sites, etc.) but also more explicit and visible to scholars (Baym, 1999). The process of reflexivity is crucial in this context, and refers to the changing nature of identity. According to Giddens (1991) this is the constant process of revision, self-

reflection, and changes we make to our presented identity “in light of new information or knowledge” (p. 20).

There is, however, difference between Goffman’s process of building “social identities” as discussed earlier in this chapter, and Giddens’ process of “self-actualization.” Goffman is more concerned with the co-presence of the individual and society, that is—the immediate social interactions that organize our performance of self in front of other individuals and groups. Goffman does not argue for one coherent set of identity markers being used by an individual in all instances, yet he stresses the consistency between the performer and observer, the individual and his/her audience (Goffman, 1959). Giddens, on the other hand, looks at identities as far more fragmented, dependent on more than immediate interactions. Giddens (1990) emphasizes the distance between time and space enacted through identity by looking at the ways in which identities are dis-embedded and then re-embedded into new forms of identities. To sum, while Goffman highlights identities as tools of becoming present in a society or situation, Giddens view identities as these processes that break the present in favor of fragmented pieces of time. These two understandings of identity, while conflicting to some extent, are both crucial for this study, as identity construction is viewed as a reformative act, bringing together multiple times, spaces, locations, and heritages.

I draw on Goffman’s conceptualization of identity to stress the social aspect of identity performance. The Persian identity is studied in this dissertation in social contexts – the usage of online media. By using Goffman’s articulation of the shared understanding created between the performers and their audiences, I am able to discuss

communal effort of creating the Persian identity. I draw on Giddens to highlight the fragmentation of that identity, and to discuss the multi-layered, intersecting, and conflicting sources of identifications used by the Persian community. By using Goffman's notion of the self, I refer to preformed and public notion of the constructed identity. By using Giddens' concepts of fragmentation and distance, I stress the multiple sources of identifications combined into the Persian identity enacted by the Persian community members online and offline. Together, the two approaches enable me with a nuanced approach to the study of post-migration identity construction.

Migration and Identity Construction

Focusing on identities in the context of migration, reflexivity is an inseparable part of this study. Acknowledging that identities are reflexive and context dependent, means also acknowledging that identities are plural and complex; they are nested, always multiple and intertwined (Scopacasa, 2014). They are also fragmented, multi-layered, and hybrid; overlapping across and within different spheres of identifications (gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) (Kraidy, 2005; Calhoun, 1994). Literature concerned with the relationship between identity and immigration focuses on these multiple, overlapping identities with respect to changing localities. Identity construction processes in the context of migration are mainly portrayed as experiences of strangeness, separation, and transformation of self (Aksoy & Robins, 2002). The negotiation and construction of identity involve geographical journey and reconfiguration of both the

place of origin and the new locality to which an immigrant arrives (Ahmed, 1999). Amidst these processes of spatial and cultural transformation, media outlets are essential resources for identity construction and maintenance (Appadurai, 1996). As identities are “never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representations” (Hall, 1990, p. 222), the need for media images and cultural repertoires is constantly avid. Diaspora communities find media outlets to be a vital resource for overcoming geographical and cultural relocations and for ensuring a consistent sense of identity and belonging in the new locality (Eswari, 2014; Li, 2013).

While this study focuses on the ethnic and national aspects of the Persian identity, it is important to acknowledge that other identity markers play a role in the identification process of the studied group and its members in their post-migration state. Religion, for example, is an underlying identity marker in the Jewish context, whether in relation to ethnicity or nationality. In the context of this dissertation project, however, I address the Jewish identity as nationality rather than religion. This is a conscious decision that follows a line of scholars that study the national-secular reading of the Jewish identity in Israel (for example: Ram, 2006; Dahan & Wasserman, 2006; Liebman & Don-Yihya, 1983). I further unpack this notion throughout the following chapters, in particular within the discussion of civil religion in Israel as seen on chapter five. I use the term civil religion as it is contextualized in studies of Jewish nationality in Israel – as a system of rituals and symbols that provide a secular reading to Judaism rather than a religious reading of nationality and the state (Liebman & Don-Yihya, 1983).

To summarize this section, I have discussed the main perspectives on the process of identity formation. Identities are presented as a social process rather than a final, static outcome. They are constructed, rather than inherent, and are often social rather than individual. Identities are built in a social context, negotiated by individuals and groups, and are being presented via media outlets. Construction of identities brings together multiple, often overlapping, markers (such as gender, religion, race, nationality, etc.) and involves constant reflection upon them. In this study, I focus on national and ethnic identity construction in the context of migration. I am interested in examining the way these identities are constructed using online environments. Therefore, in the following section I review the topic of identity construction as a whole, and immigrants' identity construction, in the context of new media and internet based platforms.

Constructing Identity via Online Environments

Early studies of identity construction in online environments were conducted in anonymous internet based spheres such as bulletin boards, news groups, and MUDs (Multi-User Domains). Focused on the topic of identity, the main concern of these studies was the extent to which identities were manipulated online. Two main perspectives characterized these studies around the late 1980s and 1990s. On the one hand, a dystopian approach towards the internet tied formations of online identities with aggressive online acts such as rape, and associated the process with negative contexts such as forgery enabled by anonymity (Dibbell, 1993; Turkle, 1995). From this

perspective, studying the relations between identity formation and deception was central to scholars' concerns (Markham, 1998; Dawson & Cowan, 2004).

On the other hand, utopian approach towards the use of online spheres for identity constructions signaled the new opportunities presented to users (Darling-Wolf, 2008). The internet allowed users to create fluid and fragmented; technologically mediated identities. These identities, in turn, allowed minority groups to overcome social marginalization. Gender, race, and religion are just some of the identity markers that were playfully challenged online, giving users opportunities to experiment with their place in a given social order (Haraway, 1991; Danet, 1998; Miller & Slater, 2000). Whether from a utopian or dystopian perspective, the online and the offline were seen in these early days as separate spheres. The movement between them allowed individuals to change their identity and become someone new. With access to endless forms of identities, identification online was perceived as a matter of choice, independent of offline physical cues (Poster, 1997). "In other words," argue Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin (2008) "the disembodied and anonymous online environment makes it possible for people to reinvent themselves through the production of new identities" (p. 1818).

In the context of web 2.0 environments, scholars have shifted into an understanding that online and offline identities, although not similar, do relate to each other. With an emphasis on user experience online, identity was conceptualized as continuous between online and offline. Scholars' fascination with identity have shifted from approaching experiences of deception and disembodiment to studying how the internet is embedded in every-day lives, including in the process of identity construction

(Verschuereen, 2006; Lövheim, 2013). Nowadays, with the proliferation of social networking sites and mobile applications, and the shift from a text based internet to immersive virtual worlds, the online and offline are seen as having an indexical relationship, one that is “causal rather than symbolic relationship to referent” (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 51). Identities presented online are not addressed as less “real” or “authentic” than offline identities (Wagner, 2013). We are now at a point in which online and offline identity might be intertwined, to an extent that new social and cultural contexts are created. This is important to understand, because in the world we live in today— “a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning... identity is becoming the main, and sometimes the only, source of meaning” (Castells, 1996/2000, p.3).

Research probing identity construction in immigrants’ usage of online environments addressed a wide array of religious, ethnic, and national groups in different locations. Globalization is marked as a central term in studies of such transnational cultures, also referred to as cultural globalization or cultural hybridization. It has opened the nation-state borders to migration of people, capital, and culture and blurred the lines between the national, ethnic, and religious layers of identity (Kraidy, 2005). Thus, culturally globalized mass media are “active across large and irregular transnational terrains” (Appadurai, 1996, p.9) becoming more and more user based via online platforms (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001).

Kang and Yang (2011) for example studied ethnic identity construction among Taiwanese immigrants in the US, and stressed the importance of new media for ethnic identity maintenance. In the same vein, Brinkerhoff (2009) investigated Afghan, Tibetans, Egyptian, Somali, and Nepali diasporas' use of online environments to construct and negotiate identity and solidarity. Brinkerhoff suggests that online outlets have been an important resource for the promotion of socioeconomic and political changes in the immigrants' homelands. In this context, online media are crucial for the maintenance of connections with the immigrants' places of origin. In the Croatian context, websites of Croatian music on demand constructed an imagined homeland around a collection of songs for Croatian-speaking users both in and outside of Croatia. Senjković and Dukić (2005) argue in this case that the online community formulated around the website experienced national solidarity and "togetherness" through online consumption on national-oriented music. Here we see again how online media become significant for immigrants looking for a sense of identity and community. Finally, Abrams, Baker & Brown (2013) addressed the religious aspect of the Jewish diaspora in the United Kingdom. They claim that social media might facilitate the creation of offline communities and ease feelings of alienation or disenfranchisement in diaspora.

Yin (2015) highlights an important distinction for studying online media in the context of diasporic identity construction. According to Yin, researchers should acknowledge the difference between ethnic media and homeland media. Ethnic media content is produced by and for the ethnic community in a host country, with content provided both in ethnic and host languages. Ethnic media content play an important role

in both assimilation of the migrating community in the new locality and in fostering unifying ethnic and cultural pride. Homeland media is produced in the migrating community's state of origin, without aiming at migrants as target audience. With the widespread of online platforms, this type of media content becomes easily accessible to migrants, contributing to the ongoing process of identity construction abroad. Thus, when approaching media content used and created by users online, scholars should consider both homeland media content produced in Iran and ethnic content produced in Israel or in other localities outside Iran by the Iranian diaspora, as integral to the process of identity construction by migrants.

Considering identity construction in online environments as the central issue addressed in this dissertation, a few conclusions can be drawn from this section. First, online identities are less doubted than they were in early research of the topic. Although deception is always an option, usage of online spheres for the construction of identities is viewed as "real" as similar and highly connected offline acts. Engaging this discussion, I view online identities as indexical to offline ones. I contend that online media users carry their identities within and between online and offline platforms, creating a sense of identification that is consistent between the two rather than distinct within each sphere. The construction of a Persian identity is viewed in this study as a communal effort, and should be situated in relevant literature. Hence, in the following section of this chapter, I review the topic of online communities in the context of media studies.

Situating the Self in Online Communities

Claiming that internet based media form new cultural structures and social relationships became a consensus among new media scholars. Online media users are now able to find and connect more easily with other users creating and promoting online communities (Jenkins, 2006; Castells, 1996/2000; Campbell, 2013). These can be communities with a prior offline existence, such as a neighborhood forum (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), or communities that were formed exclusively online, such as soap operas' fan groups (Baym, 1999). Based on a variety of shared interests and a desire for a sense of belonging, these virtual communities are defined as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993, p. xx). Online communities are viewed as a passage point, one that gathers a collection of practices and beliefs shared by individuals that might be physically separate (Stone, 1993). Just as the topic of identity formation online has been studied from different perspective, so was the topic of online communities. The different perspectives are reflected in the many names online communities gained over the years: cybersocieties, cyber communities, web groups, virtual communities, web communities, virtual social networks, e-communities, and more (Zaphiris, Ang & Laghos, 2012).

Early studies of online communities approached the internet as a 'cyberspace' or a 'virtual' space. "These terms focused on the way in which the new media seemed able to constitute spaces or places apart from the rest of social life ('real life' or offline life)"

argue Miller and Slater (2000; p. 4). These early studies were also divided into the utopian and the dystopian views of computer-mediated communication mentioned earlier in this chapter. On the one hand, computer mediated communities were signaled as emancipating forms of shared experiences, freeing users from physical reality and the physical body constraints (Verschueren, 2006, p. 170). On the other hand, scholars have also argued that online communities are inauthentic in nature (backed by the notions of anonymity and deception reviewed above), and that they have the power to enhance social isolation rather than a “real” sense of togetherness (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Thus, dystopian voices emphasized that while offline communities are real, online ones are mere representation of a community, an “unreal” aggregation of people (Slouka, 1995; Turkle, 1995; 2012; Proulx & Latzko-Toth, 2005).

A social hierarchy was constructed between the real community; the offline one, and the unreal, or not-as-real community; the online one. Such hierarchy had to do with the perception of online environments as culture rather than a cultural artifact (Hine, 2000). According to Hine (2000), viewing online life as the culture itself, means emphasizing its detachment from offline culture and the creation of social understandings unique to the online. In this context, both utopian and dystopian scholars were interested in the different social cues played out online to overcome lack of physical existence and geographical boundaries in the process of communicating and forming communities. These were mostly textual cues, as the environments were mostly text-based. For example, online-related lexicon that referred to the type of the community was designed (“rec” for hobby groups, “alt” for alternative groups;

Campbell, 2013) and linguistic shortcuts for gathering “offline information” on individuals online were used (‘asl?’ for - age, sex, location?; Verschueren, 2006).

Since the 1980s and the 1990s, the internet has dramatically changed in volume, design, and interaction patterns offered online. Text-based news groups have evolved into avatar based interactive environments, chats and forums have grown into social networking sites, and voice over internet protocols (VOIP) alongside video platforms enable users with visual and vocal internet-based communication. Moreover, Wi-Fi and mobile devices enable us an internet use that is not bounded to the home or the workplace, and blur the distinction between public and private spheres. The computer became smaller, portable, and more financially affordable, used today as a personal device rather than a device shared by multiple workplace colleagues or family members.

Studies of online communities responded to these changes, and started situating online communities in everyday life, studying them as integrated in offline cultures rather than separated from them. Thus, scholars have acknowledged the new social and cultural possibilities offered by online networks, ones that were not possible offline; such as changing perceptions of time and space on a global scale. These changes and new opportunities were not seen as separated from older generation of media. They were situated alongside them, creating a new media sphere (Castells, 1996/200; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). This embedded approach emphasizes the continuity of communities between online and offline spheres, and view their formation online as a cultural artifact, not a culture on their own (Hine, 2000). Hine (2000) summarized the view of online community as a cultural artifact in the following statement: “the meaningfulness of the

technology does not exist before the uses themselves, but is worked out at the time of use” (p. 29). Thus, scholars started treating online communities built via internet media as embedded in other social contexts, not as self-enclosed “cyberbian” apartness (Miller & Slater, 2000). A growing attention is given to the role these new spaces play in the cultural dynamics of marginalized groups.

Marginalized Communities and Media Enclaves

“Marginalized groups are commonly denied public voice or entrance into public spaces by dominant groups and thus are forced into enclaves” argues Squires (2002, p. 458). Focused on the African American community in the United States, Squires suggests that minority groups use enclave spaces to create “discursive strategies and gather oppositional resources” (p. 458). These discursive strategies and discursive places become means through which oppressed and marginalized groups can move themselves from the social and cultural periphery towards their own center (Flores, 1996). Whether tangible or imagined, these enclaves allow minority groups to celebrate their ethnicity, race, religiosity, gender, and so on, re-thinking and reconstructing their place in society.

Enclaves spaces can take shape physically, for example, as residential areas for a particular group, or built spaces with a concentration of businesses that employ a majority of owners and workers from the same ethnic/racial/religious/national background (Yajing & Ross, 2015). These, however, can also be imagined spaces. In this sense, media content and outlets often become enclaved spaces for groups that seek

distinction from the larger cultural context in which they exist. These are created both online, through internet-based media, and offline, through older generation of media outlets such as radio and television (Campbell & Golan, 2011; Li, 2013).

In this context, emphasis was given to migrating communities. According to Flores (1996) migrating communities' lack of ability to form a sense of belonging to their place of origin and new locality result in isolation, alienation, and a struggle for a space and a home of their own. These feelings often result in the formation of physical and mediated enclaved spaces. Thus, enclaves become significant in the utilization of cultural discourses that are mostly hidden from the eye of the dominant public (Squires, 2002). They become highly important to a point that "without independent spaces to retreat to in times of need or during negotiations with outsiders, marginal groups would not have as much freedom to innovate, draw upon their own traditions, and speak freely without interference from the dominant group" (p. 459).

Morris (2016) reminds us that in these conceptualizations the enclaves become sites of sequestration, refuge, and rejuvenation. Thus, I draw on this literature to establish the notion that while these enclaves might, to some extent, push the marginalized away from the public eye. They nevertheless enable a different sense of "public" discourse for the marginalized. By utilizing media, marginalized groups become visible to themselves, forming a resource for identity construction and community building, especially needed in the process of relocation and migration. Drawing upon their own unique characteristics, marginalized groups are able, through

media enclaves as a whole, and participatory online spaces in particular, to become a public of their own.

In this section, I have reviewed the construction of communities in internet-based platforms. I have shown how research have progressed from early notions of “unreal” or “inauthentic” communities formed apart from the offline, into seeing these communities as situated in day-to-day activities and cultural contexts. In my dissertation, I draw on this late notion, positioning the processes of national and ethnic identity construction as an act carried by a community. The focus is thus not on the formation of a community, but on the communal effort of forming a shared Persian identity and space. Such process, as argues earlier in this section, is carried through enclaved media spaces, allowing users heightened sense of freedom in discussions of their unique ethnic features. This brings the question of society and technology into the mix. Here, I address the relationship between society, culture, and media technology, and the question of which impact or allows which? Thus, in the following section I review three main theories that address the complex relationship between society, technology, and impact. This is done to further unpack the ways in which minority groups use media technologies for their specific needs, and the ways in which technological affordances shape minority groups’ communication abilities.

Approaches to Studying Society and Media Technology

In this section I address three theories that focus on the relationship between society and media technologies. These are Social Shaping of Technology (Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1999), Mediatization (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby, 2015), and Participatory Culture (Jenkins, 2006). The main issue addressed in this section is the shape and direction of the relationship between society and technology. In other words, this section raises the question - is it media and communication technologies that shape society or is it society that shapes advances in media technologies alongside changes in media design and use? The answer to this question is complex, and can be set on a spectrum. On the one end of the spectrum, Mediatization theory is used to understand media-related changes (Hepp, 2013, p. 616), while on the other end, the Social Shaping of Technology (Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1999) brings forward the social impact on media technologies.

Proponents of Mediatization theory approach developments in mass media and digital platforms through a technological lens, where media technologies are approached and studied as agents of change (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014). However, in comparison to more “technological heavy” approaches such as Technological Determinism and theories of media effect, Mediatization is not focused on the linear and allegedly autonomous impact of technology on society, but rather on the interrelation between changes in media and changes in society (Tsuria & Campbell, Forthcoming). Thus, the theory argues that media technologies form, in a way, our social, cultural, aesthetic, and

political orders (Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby, 2015). Mediatization, according to Hjarvard (2012), “generally refers to the process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity (e.g., politics, religion, and education) become influenced by and dependent on the media” (p. 30). Thus, looking at the technological impact on society, scholars utilizing this theory argue that non-media social actors have to adapt to media technologies’ rules and systems in order to reach audiences and advance socially (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014).

Social Shaping of Technology theory also looks at the relationship between technology and society. However, if Mediatization theorists argue for an interrelation, in which technological change plays a role in social changes, then Social Shaping of Technology looks at the interrelation between social needs and technological changes, where society plays a leading role of a change agent (Mackenzie & Wajcman, 1999). In fact, the theory was designed as an alternative for the causality and linear influence proposed by advocates of Technological Determinism (Campbell, 2010; Williams & Edge, 1996). Highlighting the social component in any technological change, Social Shaping of Technology emphasizes processes of interpretation, meaning making, problem solving, negotiation, and development within larger socio-cultural-economic contexts. Through these processes, the theory details the ways in which different social groups approach, develop, and change media technologies and technological uses (Klein & Kleinman, 2002; Howcroft, Mitev & Wilson, 2004). Thus, the Social Shaping of Technology argues for a complex relationship between society and technology, but puts forward an emphasis on the group and individual agency, alongside multiple, often

different, communication and media needs of different social groups (Pinch & Bijker, 1984).

While both theories—Mediatization and Social Shaping on Technology—draw attention to the relationship between media technologies and society, each of them do argue for one component that plays a more important role, or that is utilized as a starting point for scholarly analysis. The Social Shaping of Technology puts forward social needs and understandings as this component. Mediatization stresses the technological change as this component. A theory that bridges these two ends of the spectrum, and advocates for a case dependent approach for studying media and society, is Participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006).

Participatory culture is “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experiences participants pass along knowledge to novices” (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006, p. xi). The term relates to supportive media environments that allow individuals and groups to take active part in the creation, archiving, negotiation, and re-circulation of their culture (Jenkins, 2006). In this new culture, internet-based media allow, more than any medium before, low barriers to participation. Online media, according to Jenkins, are compatible with the aim of un-professional groups (such as fan groups) wishing to share content across distance, more quickly, more easily, and with greater visibility. “The term participatory culture contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship” (p. 3) and enables new cultural organization around new media content. Thus, the theory

emphasizes new technological affordances that allow different social players to enter discussions and discourses that were fairly closed to them before (social, political, cultural, etc.).

At the same time, these media outlets and content are being shaped, re-shaped, re-mixed, and re-articulate according to the needs and the characteristics of social groups. The emphasis of the social and the technological features that propel these processes are interchangeable, and thus Participatory Culture allows us, to some extent, to think of, and study, both technology and society as important players in larger processes such as globalization and migration, on which this project focuses. Moreover, participatory models are ones that emphasize the dissemination of information and media content that are not often available through mass media, where the involvement of participants in the creation of the media message is emphasized as a means for empowerment (Cadiz, 2005). Utilizing this perspective allows me to simultaneously look at media platforms used as unique in terms of being globally reaching and facilitating global bridges between Iran and Israel, while allowing me to also emphasize the unique usage participants create in the context of post-migration media usage. Given that this dissertation work focuses on a post-migration community, alongside the discussion of media and technology theory, the larger context of homelands and host lands, as well as diasporas, is discussed in the following section.

Diasporic Identities between Host Lands and Homelands

“Diasporic identities are characterized by a ‘continuing relationship to the homeland’ that may either be physical, when individuals and group members continue to visit the homeland, or based on an imaginary community with the knowledge that they will not, or cannot, return” (Weiner & Richards, 2008, p. 103).

“[Diasporas are] ethno-national groups whose members reside out of their home country... and who retain a sense of membership in their group of origin and a collective representation and concern for the wellbeing of their homeland, which plays a significant role in their lives in both a symbolic and normative sense” (Morawska, 2011, p. 1030).

The definitions above provide a good starting point for the process of conceptualizing diasporas. Drawing on them, I address diaspora in this study as a group that shares a physical detachment from its original homeland and a collective memory and myth about its homeland in terms of its location and history. The group also holds a strong self-identified ethnic consciousness that is presented through a sense of distinctive common history and common fate. Diaspora groups often experience a lack of acceptance within the host society, and an active pursuit to maintain relations and cultural solidarity with their place of origin (Safran, 1991; Cohen, 1997; Sheffer, 1986;

Vertovec, 1999/2000). Living in diaspora often involves the nurturing of an idealized homeland, a key element in the identity of the diasporic group (Naficy, 2001). This idealized homeland suggests a connection between scattered fellows, “whose sense of community is sustained by forms of communication and contact such as kinship, pilgrimage, trade, travel, and shared culture (language, ritual, scripture, or print and electronic media)” (Peters, 1999, p. 20). Thus, a homeland is viewed, in the broad context, as the place of origin from which an individual or a group migrated. A host land, accordingly, is the new locality to which an immigrant arrives.

Originally coined in the context of Jewish migration, diaspora is the state of a group living outside of its place of origin due to migration. Thus, the dichotomy constructed above regarding a homeland and a host land is flipped in the Jewish context. While for most ethno-national groups the process of emigrating from a homeland created a sense of diaspora, for the Jewish diaspora the process was reverse. In the case of Jewish diaspora, Israel is viewed as the homeland, and living outside of it means living in a host land. Based on this construction, a Jewish individual that was born in Brazil, for example, and migrated to Israel, returned to a homeland rather than left one. By emphasizing the notion of “returning” to a “natural homeland,” the Jewish narrative constructed a “homeland hierarchy,” in which Jewish nationality and the life in Israel are portrayed as the center of the Jewish identity (Blumer, 2011).

During the 20th century, immigration to Israel was an integral character of the Jewish social reality and the establishment of the State of Israel. Immigration from other places of origin to Israel was presented as the returning to a homeland from a variety of

host lands. The view of Israel as “The Homeland” of all immigrating Jewish people was central in the Zionist thought and in the Jewish identity (Shain, 2002; Yedgar, 2004; Cohen, 1997). Essential to this perception was the construction of the Jewish people as strangers in their land of origin, and the land of origin itself as a hostile host land (Yadlin-Segal & Meyers, 2014). Thus, Jewish individuals born anywhere outside of Israel were perceived by the Jewish-Zionist perspective as members of the Jewish diaspora. According to Shuval (1998), this construction was reflected in the Israeli Law of Return (1950), which “established an open-door policy for Jews and extensive support benefits for immigrants” (p. 4) migrating to Israel. This law presented the Jewish migration to Israel as a “natural right” of returning to a homeland from a host land.

Studying the ways in which Jewish diaspora members use online environments to maintain Jewish religious identity, Helland (2007) argues that Israel was often presented as their homeland, becoming a central component in the discourse of Jewish people living outside of Israel. In the religious context, online spheres are being used by people not just to travel online to sacred sites, but also to connect tangibly with their sacred homeland and to maintain contact with it and with people within it. Thus, by utilizing online environments, Jewish diaspora groups outside of Israel maintain this sense of Israel being the Jewish homeland. Hence, in the religious context it was found that religiously Jewish users carried the homeland hierarchy from the offline to the online.

Consistent with this approach, Peters (1999) argues that “the existence of the state of Israel likewise serves notions of diaspora from exile, since there is no political obstacle to return” (p. 20). The hypothesis that immigration to Israel means returning

home is not inclusive or representative of all migration experiences. Moreover, the assumption that there are no political obstacles for Jewish immigration is misleading. Selective migration to Israel is well documented, as reviewed earlier in this dissertation. Alongside this, politics of identity have been central tension in the Jewish Israeli society. These political conflicts reflect a gap between the official state representatives' push towards a melting-pot sense of identity and assimilation, and immigrants' wish to hold to their ethnic and national roots and heritage. One of this study's theoretical aspirations is unpacking this highly-contested field and the complex relationship between homeland and host land in the context of Iranian immigration to Israel. To do so, the following sections will further discuss the topics of homelands and host lands in the context of media studies. These will be followed by a review of the postcolonial thought, which is utilized in this study to probe the oppressive and liberating practices associated with the process of identity construction.

Moving the Census, the Map, and the Museum Online

In order to understand the uses of online media in the context of Iranian migration to Israel and the complex relations of homelands and host lands, we first need to understand the ways in which these topics were addressed in relations to offline media. Here I draw mainly on Appadurai (1990, 1996), Anderson (1983/2006), and Carey's (1989) arguments to signal what might be this study's most important theoretical contribution. Anderson's (1983/2006) most frequently quoted concept in the context of

media and nationality is probably “imagined communities.” According to Anderson, media outlets play an important role in the formation of the nation state, enabling individuals to imagine their membership in the national collective. Media outlets in this case operate as “national equipment” – those cultural tools that construct and maintain the boundaries of a national community, constantly “flagging” national identity in a public context to facilitate a shared reality among its members (Deutsch, 1953; Meyers, 2002; Billig, 1995). However, Anderson’s argument does not conclude at the national borders of a state. In his discussion of the census, the map, and the museum, Anderson presents the role of these cultural artifacts in the creation of national identity on a global scale. His argument touches upon the colonial state, and is essential for understanding identity and culture in Israel.

In the chapter ‘census, map, museum,’ Anderson (1983/2006) concludes that by using these three tools, colonial rulers can bestow a sense of national identity upon their citizens from afar. The census is a tool designed to create a sense of shared identity within a society, generating a sense of belonging. A citizen is included in a society as he or she is being measured as a citizen in the census. In the same way, using maps is another means for creating a sense of society. A map denotes the geographic imagined “place” of the community, making its imagined borders visible to the citizens. Maps, in this sense, are strong instrumental tools for constructing and maintaining communal sense, an “immutable mobile” that enable the spread of the national consciousness (Latour, 1986). Finally, the museum represents those cultural truths that are worth archiving. It is a place for creating and curating shared narratives and understandings of

a society's shared past, and as an outcome, shared identity. Together, these three act as both the grammar and the concretization of an imagined community.

Mass media outlets were found to function in a very similar way. Replacing the notion of the "imagined community" with that of the "community of sentiment," Appadurai (1991, 1996) addresses those social solidarities and collective experiences formed around mass media. According to Appadurai, "part of what mass media make possible, because of the conditions of collective reading, criticism, and pleasure, is... a 'community of sentiment'" (1996, p.8). This community connects an individual's identity with a larger community, forming the homeland sentiment of groups in diaspora. This notion is well established in studies of diasporic communities' media usage. Studying the consumption of Iranian originated television content by Iranian immigrant in Los Angeles, Naficy (1993) found that television programs assist immigrants with two important aspects of their identity formation. Iranian television consumed in exile provided migrants with the much-needed nostalgia and sense of home, while also allowing them to construct and validate a new sense of community in exile through shared cultural markers.

In the same vein, Eswari (2014) studied the consumption of foreign television in the context of Indian migration. He argues that satellite television channels provide members of the Indian diaspora in the United States with a sphere to negotiate their home and host cultures and ethnicities. Via television content, members of the Indian diaspora familiarize themselves with the host culture, but also find "ontological security" (p.34), a sense of belonging to a place of origin, a home, or a culture.

Homeland originated content provides a vital resource for these diasporic communities of sentiment. Sun (2002) exemplifies these claims in her studies of diasporic Chinese communities. According to Sun, consuming homeland media (Chinese media in this context) eased longing and activated collective memories. Although immigrants outside of China were not the intended audience of the Chinese TV shows, these shows were still important for the maintenance of their identities and nostalgia for home, even more than it did for Chinese citizens within China. For migrants, mass media outlets became a place for cultural gathering, a shared source for identity markers, and a place for the formation of a community. Thus, drawing on Carey's (1989) definition of communication, media platforms become a cultural ritual for migrants looking for a connection with their homeland, a reassuring framing of their identity and place of origin. This cultural approach to media studies is crucial to the study of post-migration communities, as it focuses on those acts that represent and reinforces one's identity and culture.

According to Carey (1989) communication can be conceptualized both in terms of a transmission and in terms of a ritual. Looking at communication as transmission, media outlets are viewed as channels for the transportation of information. Here attention is given to the transfer of signals and messages between senders and receivers. This model falls under early approaches to media studies, mostly focused on issues of persuasion and propaganda. Alongside this approach, media outlets can also be viewed as facilitators of social ceremonies. They provide audiences with shared symbols and shared experiences that build a sense of community across time. Consuming media is

thus not only an act of getting and disseminating information, or transmitting it from point A to point B, but is also a ritual, an act of gathering that becomes meaningful for the creation and reinforcement of a sense of community (Carey, 1989).

While some media scholars define media-related rituals as unique “media events,” spectacles that disrupt the day-to-day, routine, or mundane media schedule (Dayan & Katz, 1994), the cultural approach to communication articulated by Carey suggests a different view. According to the cultural approach to communication, culture and communities are built around these two social aspects of communication – sharing and gathering. The use of media itself becomes a ritual, a ceremony that draws the community together. As Dewey (in Carey, 1989, p. 18) argues: “there is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common.”

Based on this cultural approach, and considering the census, the map, and the museum, I ask in this study –what are some of the similar tools that community members use to denote the borders, past, and belonging to the community online? How do members of the Persian community in Israel discuss the role of online media in their experiences of community? What motivations stand behind their usage of online environment for the task of transcultural representation of national-ethnic identity? In line with other studies that have argued for the new possibilities online media provide for the articulation of self in the context of migration (Wallis, 2013), I wish to develop a line of inquiry that emphasizes the possibilities of voluntary ethnic-nation self-

representation online. To further ground this aim in constructivist theories, I review in the last section of this chapter the postcolonial theory. This is done to highlight the process of identity construction within systems of cultural, political, and economic power, issues that are further developed in the analysis chapters of this dissertation.

Postcolonial Thought and Identity

The postcolonial approach comprises of a set of theories primarily seeking to critique and deconstruct practices of modern western colonialism (or neo-colonialism) in western and non-western societies (Banerjee & Prasad, 2008). “In a very fundamental sense,” Bahri (1995) reminds us, “postcolonial is that which has been preceded by colonization” (p. 51). This point of view position postcolonialism as a sort of framing device that characterizes the second half of the twentieth century. A different point of view positions postcolonialism as the study of cultural interactions between colonizing powers and the societies they colonized, “and the traces that this interaction left on the literature, arts, and human sciences of both societies” (p. 52).

The prefix “post,” thus, refers to a point of view, an intellectual effort that asks to unpack global oppressions and opportunities informed by and critical of colonial orders. This is to say, “post” is not necessarily a marker in time that starts at one point, post WWII, rather, a way of thinking about colonial projects, with intellectual roots prior to this time. Some distinguish the two postcolonial approaches by the use of a hyphen. The hyphenated post-colonial refers to a point in time, post the era of the colonies, while the

unhyphenated term, postcolonialism, refers to the critical point of view. In this dissertation project, I adopt the second approach, using postcolonial approaches as critical frameworks of analysis rather than distinct points in time.

In this context, it is important to note that the roots of the postcolonial thought stem from anti-colonial stands expressed by black philosophers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, and colonized nations' leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, who asked to free their communities from long periods of oppressions. From these early days, postcolonial theory has evolved, maintaining a critical stance through embracement of new ideas and approaches. Several main shifts and expansions, as detailed by Shenhav and Hever (2002a), identify this evolution. First, focusing on identity as a key term, contemporary postcolonial theorists steer away from a binary approach of analyzing culture, to promote awareness of multi-layered forms of interconnected identities that negotiate multiple sources of identification such as religion, race, migration, and so on. Thus, the colonial cultural categories identifying the occident/west as privileged and superior while positioning the orient/non-western as inferior (Said, 1978) are replaced in the postcolonial mindset with notions of multiplicity, overlapping, or intersecting identity markers. One way to explain this notion is through the formation of national identity.

Bhabha (1994), a prominent postcolonial scholar, coined the term “third space” to address hybrid notions of national identity formation. The “third space” emphasizes that identity is constructed between constantly changing global and local forces, east and west binaries, and national and foreign cultural influences. Between these sources of affinity—locality, nationality, religion, race, ethnicity, and the like—hybrid identities are

formed. By pointing out hybrid identities, Bhabha acknowledges the re-working of modern social, cultural, and economic narratives into a postmodern perception of self, nations, and cultures. The fusing of social categories positions the third space as the notional realm in which social structures and truths are questioned and rearticulated to encompass the agency of constructing varying manifestations of hybrid identities in our postcolonial age.

This scholarly shift also expands the field of postcolonialism studying the politics of “blackness” (or other racial and ethnic descriptors) to the study of “whiteness.” Instead of looking at whiteness as a given, a transparent identifier, writers such as Toni Morrison (1992) ask to “avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject, from the described and imagined to the describers and the imaginers, from the serving to the served” (p. 90). Thus, postcolonial studies endeavor at dissolving the white gaze, aiming at a deeper understanding of oppressions through the analysis of practices that establish whiteness as a given and natural social category. Through such examination, a greater understanding of oppressions based on racial and ethnic identifiers are achieved.

A second shift pertains to the epistemological perspective of writing and studying postcolonialism. Here we see a movement towards the oppressed point of view, focusing on non-Eurocentric perspectives on culture, identity, and politics. This expansion is nicely exemplified in the practice of ethnography nowadays. With roots in the enlightenment project of European colonial empires of the 19th century, European ethnographers compiled information about the cultural practices among the “primitives”

populating colonized lands. These early scholars produced accounts of cultures as fixed, frozen in time, turning the collected objects and information into a cultural system, justifying inequality and racist theories (La Pastina & Yadlin-Segal, 2016). The task of representation in the ethnographic project has immensely changed over the years. The exploration of the “primitive” or “exotic subject” is substituted today by exploration of the locality and even the marginalized group the ethnographer is a part of. The European-centric scholar is replaced by the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual ethnographer.

Finally, the postcolonial project asks to expand the study of nationality into the study of post-nationality. From this perspective, scholars ask to understand the oppressive nature of the national meta-narrative in its western nature, looking at the possible practices that question or subvert national narratives and constructions. Shenhav and Hever (2002a) summarize this approach in the following:

As part of this stand, nationalism was seen as imported and reproduced, transferred as part of the processes of colonization and migration and is expressed in different ways. In other words, a universal national model includes a bricolage of highly particular elements, when settling them together necessitates the use of force and repression. Instead of presenting nationalism as a universal force, subordinating national citizens in a uniform manner, postcolonial perspectives identify heterogeneous identities and processes, challenging the validity and universal justification of nationality (p. 18).

Focused on ethnicity and nationality in Israel, particularly in the context of marginalized groups, postcolonial theories and concepts become a fertile ground for studying the Israeli society. Zionism, according to the postcolonial approach, is perceived as a colonial movement in two particular ways. First, focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel is viewed as a colonial state, culturally, politically, economically, and geographically oppressing Palestinians inside and outside the green line. While highly impotent, this approach is less pertinent to the current dissertation project. A second view that positions Israel as a colonial state relates to migration and cultural-ethnic oppression, becomes a central line of thought in this dissertation. According to Israeli scholars (Boyarin, 1997; Shenhav & Hever, 2002a; Shenhav & Hever, 2002b, Shohat, 2005) colonialism is shaped within one of the prominent inter-Jewish-national society schisms, which is the ethnic, or Ashkenazi-Mizrahi clash. In this context, postcolonial scholars ask to unpack latent and overt oppression systems within the Zionist-backed Israeli culture. The main assumption of this approach is that European-centric Zionist cultural-educational-political structures in Israel shaped systematic ethnic oppressions in the Israeli society, such that are experienced by minority groups even today. Focusing on the Persian identity in the Israeli context, I utilize the postcolonial perspective to ask questions about ethnicity, nationalism, and culture as they are reflected through new media usage.

Thus far in this chapter, I have reviewed central literature and concepts related to studying Persian identity construction in online environments. I have discussed identity being a process of social construction and narrowed down the focus of the dissertation to

Persian identity construction. Persian identity is defined as a cultural one, conflating national, ethnic, and religious identifications both in the Israeli and in the Iranian contexts. I have also discussed the topic of formulating identities in online environments, and situated this dissertation in an approach viewing online and offline identities as indexical to each other, intertwined rather than disparate. Online identities in this dissertation are closely tied with online communities, arguing that identities are social, built by identification with a group or a community. In the case on online identities, both online and offline communities play a role in identification process. Based on the literature reviewed above, this study investigates how online platforms enable individuals with a sphere for constructing their Persian identity within a community. Such process is carried within and between online and offline spheres, and will be studied via an ethnographic research. Probing the construction of identities by media users, I utilize cultural and postcolonial theories, as described above, to discuss nationality, culture, and ethnicity in the Israeli society.

CHAPTER III

THEORY AND APPLICATION OF RESEARCH IN AND OF ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

This study examines the ways in which members of the Persian community in Israel use online environments to construct their Persian identity. Specifically, I am interested in the ways such constructions affirm and resist cultural oppressions and hegemonic narratives in the Israeli society, for example, blur the distinctions between homeland and host land in the context of Jewish migration and diaspora. I am, however, not an immigrant living in Israel, nor a member of the Persian community. Thus, I find that ethnography is a research approach that will allow me an in-depth understanding of media usage in such context. As a qualitative stance, ethnography enables researchers to collect data that represent the complexity of day-to-day lives, and the meaning groups and individuals give to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Focusing on the everyday use of online media for identity construction, I utilize an ethnographic approach to media studies to discuss the meaning members of the Persian community give to this process of identity construction.

I open the chapter with a discussion of qualitative methods in the study of online and digital media. This discussion is followed by a review of expansion of ethnographic research from the offline to the online, focusing on existing research approaches for the use of ethnography in online studies. This is followed by the theoretical discussions of data collection within and between online and offline environments. In this section, I

focus on the conceptualization of multi-sited ethnography and its application in media studies. I also review the unique ethical considerations required from an ethnographer studying online environments. I then turn to discuss the conceptualization of user research vs. audience reception research within media studies as a unique consideration of online research. Finally, I conclude the chapter with an in-depth discussion of the methodological application of online ethnography to the case of Persian identity construction in Israel.

Qualitative Methods Online

As internet-based environments become central spheres of conduct in our everyday lives, scholars are increasingly focused on how culture is manifested online. Researchers studying online environments are not only looking into new social and cultural phenomena, but also contributing to the emerging methodological branch defined as “digital research methods.” In this emerging sphere, researchers develop new tools and approaches, as well as expand and transform traditional research approaches, methods, and tools to fit with the constantly changing online environments. Thus, digital research methods refer both to quantitative and qualitative research, and are viewed as the “use of online and digital technologies to collect and analyze research data” (Roberts, Hine, Morey, Snee & Watson, 2013).

Under this broad term, we can find two clusters of methods: digitized methods and natively digital methods (Rogers, 2013). Digitized methods originate offline and are

moved online for internet based media research, while natively digital methods are those that emerged online. Surveys are a key example of digitized methods. A method that originated offline was easily migrated online for data collection via designated websites (e.g. survey monkey), email exchange, and more. In contrast, researchers utilizing natively digital methods base their analysis and data collection on already existing online tools and affordances such as hyperlinks, hashtags, and visualization software. Since I conduct my research through an ethnographic lens, I focus in this review on digitized qualitative methods as a whole, and ethnography in particular.

In the early days of internet research, we find many studies that “digitized” qualitative methods for studying culture, communities, and identity online. Markham (1998), in her study of early identity construction in MUDs, used online interviews to understand the affordances of internet-mediated environments for formulating sense of self online. Given that internet-mediated spheres were text-based media in the early 1990s, most interviews in Markham’s study were conducted in writing, and much emphasis was given in her writings to the technical aspect of the interview itself (its length, techniques, unique language, pros and cons, etc.). Thus, Markham utilized an offline method—the interview—to understand the online experiences of self and communication for internet users. Based on the data she collected online, Markham concluded: “Even in purely text based online context, people establish and maintain intimate friendships, romantic relationships, and stable communities” (p. 17).

Another offline qualitative method—textual analysis—was migrated online by Baym (1999) to study an internet newsgroup dedicated to soap operas. As part of her

ethnographic project, Baym conducted a discourse analysis of 524 newsgroup posts featured in the newsgroup. Based on this analysis Baym argue that “the social context of an online group is perhaps the single most important influence on the identities constructed within it... people in... online communities define themselves not just in relations to their offline selves or to the medium, but also in relation to one another and to the group as a whole” (pp.157-158).

Baym and Markham’s studies demonstrate the translation of offline methods and social pattern into online environments. These, as argued before, fall under the “digitized methods” category. Other, more recent studies focus on the ways in which online information can be translated into offline trends and predictions. Here we see tools and methods that enable visualizing knowledge and information and utilizing it for mapping of offline realities. Categorized as using natively digital methods and tools, studies of this type analyze online information from internet platforms such as social media and blogs to predict offline social trends such as movies’ revenues (Asur & Huberman, 2010), stock market changes (Bollen, Mao & Zeng, 2011), and disease transmission (Sadilek, Kautz & Silenzio, 2012). All of these studies use digitalized and digital methods to study online platforms and users.

As part of the discussion of digital research methods, it is important to acknowledge those online digital tools that are being used for studying offline environments. Under the approach conceptualized as digital ethnography for example, we can find scholars who use digital and online tools to conduct qualitative research offline. Online questionnaires digitally captured and stored, videos, blogs, digital pens,

wikis, embedded cyborg technologies, and visualization software are just some of these tools (Ducheneaut, Yee & Bellotti 2010; Murthy, 2008; 2011). Qualitative digital research can thus be conducted in primarily offline environments and still be considered digital. Yet, as argued by Murthy (2011), the combination of the two spheres “can increase data validity through triangulation” (p.171). Thus, triangulation—the use of multiple methods and sources of data—secures a rigorous, in-depth understanding of the phenomenon studied in a qualitative research (Denzin, 2012). Conducting an ethnographic research is one way to reach such triangulation of methods. To ground the discussion of data collection online and offline, I discuss in the next section of this chapter the expansion of ethnography to online environments, its different manifestations online, and the necessity of addressing multiple sites of inquiry when pursuing an ethnographic research.

Expanding Ethnographic Research from the Offline to the Online

Ethnographic research seeks to provide a qualitative-interpretive in-depth analysis of social interactions. It is “an approach for studying everyday life as lived by groups of people [that] provides powerful resource for the study of the cultures of virtual worlds” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor, 2012, p. 1). Thus, using ethnographic approaches for studying the usage of and participation in online environments allow me to produce a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) viewing participants as an essential source for understanding the studied cultural phenomenon. Led by this study’s participants, I am

able to observe, record, analyze, and inscribe the Persian experience of Iranian immigrants in Israel, and the way it is translated within and between online and offline environments.

Early implementations of ethnography (19th century) are rooted in the enlightenment period. Backed by European colonial powers, researchers mapped the world, producing accounts of cultures as fixed and static through survey data. Early 20th century western ethnographic accounts steered away the approach from utilizing survey data into a form of a participatory practice. Leading among these was Malinowski (1989) and his early conceptualizations of ethnographic participant observation and fieldwork. Further shifting the concentration of the ethnographic process from the singular interpretation of the ethnographer into a multi-layered analysis comprising both participants' point of view and the researcher interpretation Geertz (1973) introduced ethnographers to the concept of "thick description."

Originally coined by Gilbert Ryle, and further developed by Geertz, this intellectual effort calls to view participants as an essential source for understanding a cultural phenomenon. Hence, ethnographers, in a way, depend on research participants to fully describe the topic they are studying. Assisted by their participants, ethnographers observe, record, analyze, and inscribe specific cultural phenomena in order to further understand "the universe of human discourse" (p. 14). With the spread of the participants led research approach in the field of anthropology, many questions were raised, challenging the validity of ethnography and anthropology in the postmodern era. These questions emanated as a backlash to the colonial origin of the discipline, and as a part of

a representation crisis and a methodological turn experienced in anthropology, but also in related fields such as rhetoric and sociology. According to Marcus (1998), these critiques were concerned with the “grand narratives” employed by ethnographers as a priori set of theoretical and epistemic structures. An example for such a grand narrative can be Capitalism as an economic system; related to the way we understand the influence of Capitalism on society (e.g. taken for granted social-economic class divides and power structures that were not questioned enough by ethnographers).

The response to these critiques, according to Marcus, is seen in a process of methodological self-reflection in anthropology and other fields such as cultural studies and media studies. Thus, nowadays we see more ethnographic projects that no longer dramatically cross cultural boundaries. We also see an almost paranoid withdrawal from employing social and cultural pre-assumptions based on meta-narratives (related to gender, east-west binaries, economics, historical narratives, sexuality, etc.). In the same vein, the task of representation in the ethnographic project has changed. The “exotic subject” is substituted today by the study of the self and the society the ethnographer is a part of, where the white, Western, European\American centric ethnographer is replaced by the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual ethnographer.

These changing modes of inquiry were also experienced in the field of media studies. Since its introduction to media studies around the late 1960s and early 1970s, ethnography became synonymous with audience analysis and reception studies. At these early stages, researchers have addressed the complexity of communicative processes in everyday settings by immersing themselves in local cultural contexts, mainly ones that

pertain to disenfranchised cultural and social groups (La Pastina & Yadin-Segal, 2016). The ethnographic approach helped media scholars to overcome the large generalizations required in a field characterized up to that point by quantitative methods, by focusing on smaller cases in a more sensitive, in-depth manner (Horst, Hjorth & Tacchi, 2012). The use of ethnography, however, had many limitations in the context of media studies.

Baym (1999) argues that early media studies using ethnography as their methodological stance, have failed to holistically approach their studied community. While applied in other disciplines for the studies of larger, linguistically, gendered, nationally, or ethnically bounded groups, media audience groups were not bounded or clearly defined. Drawing on Ang's critique of the topic, Baym stresses: "audiences rarely represent and organize themselves as 'we, the audience' ... even if one wanted to find a nicely bounded, self-defined audience community of interrelated members, it has not been easy" (p. 19). In the case of media studies, the heart of the ethnographic process – participant observation – was often replaced with brief visits to subjects' personal homes, focus groups, and interviews, which qualify as qualitative methods, but not necessarily as ethnography. Nonetheless, ethnography was and still is seen as a means of reaching a rich account of the lives and social structures, and cultural habits and values of participants. Ethnographic research allows media scholars a thorough understanding of material and symbolic aspects of the everyday lives related to media consumption (Morley & Silverstone, 1991).

Taking the mentioned limitations of ethnography into mind, Baym approaches the internet as a possible way to further incorporate participant observation into media

studies. Online platforms, according to Baym, proliferate the existence of self-defined audience communities and make them visible to researchers using ethnographic approaches in ways that did not exist offline. With the introduction of internet-based media into the domestic sphere, the 1990s and early 2000s represent the expansion of offline\traditional ethnographic work to online ethnography (Wittel, 2000). Ethnography, as a methodological stance, has been “broadened and reformulated through new proposals such as digital ethnography, ethnography on/of/through the Internet, connective ethnography, networked ethnography, cyberethnography, etc. Each of these maintains its own dialogue with the established tradition of ethnography ... in different ways” (Domínguez, Beaulieu, Estalella, Gómez, Schnettler & Read, 2007, p.1). Ethnography has been translated and redefined within the study of digital cultures and applications, creating a diverse set of methodological approaches.

Ethnography of and in Online Environments

Ethnographic research of internet-based media was conducted as early as the 1980s, focusing on older versions of computed interaction and communication. Hakken’s *Cyborgs@ cyberspace?: An ethnographer looks to the future* is a prime example for these early studies. According to Hakken, “cyberspace refers to the notional social arena we enter when using computers to communicate... [a] type of culture being created via Advanced Information Technology (AIT), the congeries of artifacts, practices, and relationships coming together around computing” (p. 1). Based on this notion, Hakken’s

ethnographic explorations are focused on the ways in which computer technologies were incorporated into existing offline spheres. Since connectivity and web 2.0 online spheres were not the main features of computer technologies, Hakken's research mainly addressed the work place and the introduction of different computer based platforms into it. Hakken's aim was to convey the cultural aspect of a highly technical field; the human agency in a field that is focused on technology.

Why, then, does Hakken writes about cyber-ethnography rather than just "ethnography"? This has to do with the way he perceives human-technology interaction. Hakken claims, in line with the Actor Network theory, that a cyborg is any individual that uses computers (not what we perceive today, as online, place less, sci-fi avatars). Cyborgs are users communicating via computers (again, not necessarily connected to other computers), when cyberspace is the sphere of conduct for all human and non-human computer-mediated activity. Correlating with these notions, cyber-ethnography includes both observation and active participation of cyborg's use of computed technology in various contexts (workplace and home for example).

Another form of internet related ethnography—virtual ethnography—is discussed in Hine's (2000) book *Virtual Ethnography*. In contrast to Hakken's studies, Hine argues that this type of ethnography focuses on online connectivity, and in line with larger changes of the era, she refers to her ethnographic work as multi-sited. Corresponding with Hakken's claims, Hine (2000) stresses that "work in sociology of technology and in media sociology sustains a view of technologies, including communications media, as thoroughly socially shaped" (p. 38). According to Hine (2007) virtual ethnography

[M]oves between online and offline as users of computer-mediated communication do... looking at the construction of boundaries and the ways in which different forms of communication are used to contextualize one another. It is open to embedding processes, looking both at the ways that lives are embedded into computer-mediated communication and processes through which computer-mediated communication is embedded into lives (p. 617).

Thus far, I have addressed earlier notions of internet-related ethnography, ones that studied typed-based internet as the most advanced form of online connectivity. Since the 1980s and the 1990s, the internet has dramatically changed in volume, design, and interaction patterns offered online. Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor's (2012) book *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*, captures said changes as they are manifested in relations to ethnographic research. In their book, Boellstorff et al. (2012) discuss ethnographic work as it is manifested online. While Hine refers to all internet mediated activities and their relations to the offline under the umbrella of virtual ethnography, Boellstorff et al. differentiate between studying virtual worlds and other online environments. They make a distinction between 'ethnography of the virtual' (applied when studying virtual worlds) and 'virtual ethnography' (for other online environments).

A virtual world, according to them, is a multi-user platform that creates a sense of "worldness" and continues to exist in some form even if the users log off. These environments allow participants to embody themselves in the virtual via the use of an

avatar. Based on this definition, Boellstorff et al. consider social networks, chat rooms, forums, and some of the first person online games as environments that cannot be studied by ethnography of the virtual. “Ethnographic research requires immersion in a field site using a palette of methods that always include the central technique of participant observation” (p. 3) Boellstorff et al. argue. Their goal in applying ethnography of the virtual to study online environments is to comprehend everyday perspective by participating in what they see as daily life “rather than to subject people to experimental stimuli or decontextualized interviews” (p. 3).

Horst and Miller (2012) view digital anthropology as an emerging sub-discipline of anthropology, and define it as a “binary code,” “everything that has been developed by or can be reduced to, the binary – that is bits consisting of 0s and 1s” (p. 5). Echoing Boellstorff et al.’s (2012) argument, digital ethnography stresses the centrality of participant observation to the ethnographic research. It is employed, alongside other methods and tools such as interviews and textual analysis, in both online and offline settings. According to them, virtual and actual worlds are not collapsing into one sphere. The virtual and actual, or the offline and the online, have an indexical relationship, one that is “causal rather than symbolic relationship to referent” (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 51). This approach requires a review of the practical research implications in terms of ethical considerations (to be reviewed later in the chapter) and data collection, as discussed in the following section of the chapter.

Collecting Data between Online and Offline Spheres

It was already argued earlier, that online phenomena such as building communities and constructing identity are viewed as real and authentic, continues to offline spheres rather than disconnected of them (Horst & Miller, 2013). However, when it comes to data collection between online and offline spheres, different scholars hold different approaches towards data triangulation. On the one hand, we find studies that promote data collection only in online environments. Donath (1999), for example, studied identity formation in Usenet newsgroups, using data that originated solely online. Donath, who emphasized the centrality of online environments for her study, focused on questions about the components and features of text posted by users in these environments, and on the identity markers embedded in them (names and visual representation for example). Donath did not focus on the connection or correlation of these markers with offline environments. Studying identity markers as they are presented online, according to Donath, does not require the collection of related data offline, and enables scholarly examination exclusively in online platforms.

An example of an ethnographic work focused on online data collection and analysis can be found in Marciano's (2014) account of negotiating transgender identities in Israeli forums. Based on what Marciano describes as a virtual ethnography, he conducted a discourse analysis of online domains essential to the Israeli transgender community. Here, Marciano only analyzes online texts posted on two main forums, with the wish to emphasize the ways in which transgender users employ online spheres to

negotiate identity. While observing and participating in community events both online and offline, Marciano's final analysis focused solely on online texts.

The researches described above raise the question of the field boundary. That is – where does a phenomenon start and where does it end? With the increasing understanding of the online and the offline relation as contiguity, can a scholar nowadays ignore one of these spheres completely? The answer depends, of course, on the studied phenomenon and the researcher's approaches towards this relationship. In the cases of Marciano and Donath's research projects, their main interest was online dynamics. Hence, analyzing data that is restricted to online collection is valid and effective. However, rather than studying phenomena that occur only online or offline, many scholars focus their ethnographic research nowadays on the ways in which culture, identity, community, relationships, etc. are carried between and within different online and offline spheres.

While some researchers pursue data collection only in online spheres, we can see examples of studies that combined data gathered in offline and online spheres into one set of observations. Orgad (2008), for example, argues that some situations require data collection both online and offline. In her studies of the meanings of online engagement for women with breast cancer, the use of the internet is conceptualized as embedded in the participants' everyday experience of illness. In order to understand the study participants' online engagement, information and data about their offline, day-to-day coping with breast cancer was needed. Thus, Orgad analyzed the data and constructed conclusions based on ethnographic work both online and offline.

In the same vein, Campbell (2005) stresses the need of online and offline data collection for the understanding of complex social interactions. Focusing on the formation of religious communities online, Campbell studied the community building practices of fourteen online religious groups through an ethnographic lens. The research included the use of multiple digital methods online and offline, such as email exchange, face-to-face interviews with selected members, and attending online and offline gathering of some of the communities. Data triangulation between the online and offline was a tool for verifying the accuracy of the data collected online, but also an important layer for depicting the full experience of religious communities today.

To reiterate, my argument in the last few passages focused on the expansion of research from the offline to the online, a movement that requires in-depth thinking about the data collected and analyzed in one's research. These epistemic and methodological considerations relate to the studied phenomenon, and require a process of decision making on the researcher's part. In the lack of a clear thumb rule for data collection and analysis in online research, a somewhat apologetic approach is often required, fully delineating the decision-making process and the reasoning behind the collection and analysis process. This requirement, coupled with the diverse approaches to ethnographies of internet-based media, makes a clear working or operational definition of one's approach a necessity. Thus, in the following section, I focus on the definition of "online ethnography" as the methodological stance employed in this dissertation.

Online Ethnography as a Multi Sited Project

The scholars and researchers cited above reveal the diversity of ethnographic research in the digital age. Alongside the approaches abovementioned, scholars address ethnographies of internet-based communication and media as “netnography” (Kozinets, 2002), “internet ethnography” (Sade-Beck, 2004), “cyberethnography” (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007), “webnography” (Puri, 2007), “connective ethnography” (Fields & Kafai, 2009) and “network ethnography” (Howard, 2002). While often overlapping in definition, each of these approaches to ethnographic work emphasizes a different aspect of internet research. Some highlight linguistic components, other focus on embeddedness and participation. Thus, a clear definition of the term “online ethnography” is required in order to highlight the approach taken in this specific dissertation project.

Online ethnography is the “extension of traditional collaborative ethnography, in which a network of participant observers in offline laboratories or networks, as well as online, work together (sometimes unknowingly) to produce ethnography” (Gatson; 2011; p. 245). It is the research of physical or online culture at the intersection of internet-based communication and everyday life (Markham, 2005). Online ethnography ranges from a text centered approaches, focusing on “studying patterns of communication and social relationships accomplished through language” using log-data through observation and archival work (Androutsopoulos, 2008, n.d.), to real-time interactions, based on participant observation and interviews (Hine, 2015). My project

focuses on the new possibilities online environments provide their users in terms of identity and community formation. Thus, as will be further explained later in the chapter, I combine online and offline participation, with thematic textual analysis, interviews, and online observations to create a rich and comprehensive understanding of the role online and offline interactions play in the formation of Persian identity in Israel. My data collection is based on real-time participation rather than archival one. That is, I collected data for analysis through observation and participation in real-time occurrences, rather than scrolling back to older posts, shares, discussions, and the like, for data collection.

While focusing on new online media, the methodological approach of online ethnography is consistent with traditional offline ethnographic research. First, studying internet-mediated interactions is tied with the basic interface of the internet – the World Wide Web. This structure resonates Geertz's (1973) notion of culture being a web of significance (p.5). Drawing on Max Weber's work, Geertz argues that the ethnographic work is the process of unpacking and interpreting meanings within a cultural web. No one cultural notion or artifact stands on its own in a culture. Rather, they are all gathered into a "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit" (pp. 9-10).

The basic notion of online platforms being connected by the web, that is, the World Wide Web, is central to online research. Online platforms are linked and connected, referring to each other through hyperlinks, functions of sharing and embedding, and users that populate them (van Dijck, 2013; Haskins, 2007). In addition,

and as mentioned before, online spheres nowadays, are viewed as continues to the offline ones, integrated and interwoven rather than separated from (Castells, 1996/2000). Hence, the fieldwork of this study is constructed within and between different online and offline sites, viewing them as a connected web rather than two distinct spheres. Culture and identity are thus studied as constructed and carried within and between the online and the offline.

Second, ethnographic research in the digital era becomes a multi-sited project. Coined by Marcus (1998), multi-sited ethnography moves away from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research into an examination of the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities within new understandings of the time-space order. “This mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity that destabilize the distinction” (p. 80). Multi-sited ethnographies follow their subjects of study through several different modes, following conflicts, social metaphors, biographical narratives, material objects, intellectual properties, etc.

While others have utilized the multi-sited approach in the context of media and migration studies, it seems like its application remained partial or only theoretical, used only as a methodological model rather than an actual empirical examination (Wilson & Peterson, 2002; and Larsen, 2008 for example). Some scholars have discussed multi-sited ethnography as it pertains to online media usage, but looked at offline locations as the only sites of their studies (Charmarkeh, 2013; Aouragh, 2008). That is, interaction with participants was conducted only offline, discussing online communication, online

usage, and online interaction rather than immersing in the discussed online environments as researchers. Additional researchers that utilized multi-sited explorations in their studies have distinguished between online platforms and “the real life” (that is, offline settings), expressing older perceptions of the hierarchy between the online and the offline within their multi-sited research (Ostrander, 2008). Some researchers did include both online and offline sites as equally important to the ethnographic process, but did not document the movement between different online sites (that is, focused only on one site online rather than on multiple sites as the name of the approach suggests; Gatson & Zweernik, 2004). Finally, some have drawn on the multi-sited stance, studying multiple online and offline sites at once, but did not follow the users, metaphors, goods, etc. between the different sites, rather used a digitized algorithm search based on key words (Google search) to identify multiple sites of interest (Hine, 2007).

These studies exemplify the complexity of actual immersion in multiple, often geographically non-contiguous sites of online-offline multi-sited ethnography. In my dissertation, I aim at this kind of immersion, as I “follow the people” (Marcus, 1998, p. 90) to discuss the movement of identities and communities within and between online and offline spheres. Thus, I emphasize the importance of both online and offline data collection in multiple sites, as well as emphasizing the participants who lead the ethnographic journey to sites of significance. I also stress the need of different levels of immersion in the studied sites, through different observational methods.

The goal of using the multi-sited notion in this study is thus three-folded. First, focusing on the physical and imagined movement between homelands and host lands

through migration, the study focuses on cultural movements between sites and identifications rather than their formation in one site. Thus, the study refers to the way culture is circulated between geographically non-contiguous spaces. Second, this is a multi-sited effort because it emphasizes the movement of culture and identity between the offline and the online sphere, among different online and offline sites, between national communities of sentiments, and between homelands. Here I am not studying merely the movement of people, but the moving and changing nature of national and ethnic identity as it pertains to geography, locality, and specific national contexts. Third, being a media based ethnography, the research movement between different media platforms, and between and within online and offline spheres is viewed as movement between sites.

Focusing on the importance of online platforms for the participants themselves, I let the participants lead me to these spheres—online and offline—that have significance for their sense of identity. Starting in one specific Facebook group (“It means you are Persian”), participants led me to other Facebook groups in which I was able to conduct participant observation. I also followed participants to other websites, social media platforms, and blogs. Two such sites (that is, research sites, not web-sites), for example, is the globally reaching online radio stations studied in this research, and the use of mobile apps for maintaining connection and discussing matters of identities between Israel and Iran. I also followed participants from the online to the offline, attending multiple social gathering in Israel. This participants-led multi-sited approach draws

heavily on Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor's (2012) approach to the centrality of the user in the ethnographic research of and in online environments.

According to Boellstorff et al. (2012) an ethnographer of online environments needs to take lead from their informants, following them to, as well as collecting data in, multiple online contexts. Ethnographic research usually includes journeying to other online locals such as forums, blogs, and wikis. Engagement with participants is extended to other sites, including forums, instant messaging, podcasts, other virtual worlds, blogs, wikis, guides, videos, email, Facebook, twitter, and gaming databases. Thus, Boellstorff et al. remind us that

[E]thnography is not a method narrowly defined; it is not part of the same categorical set as 'interview,' 'survey,' and so on. Rather...the written product of a palette of methods, but also a methodological approach in which participant observation is a critical element, and in which research is guided by experience unfolding in the field (p.15).

Here, Boellstorff et al. focus on online journeying. My ethnographic project expands this approach to collect data in offline settings that are also integral to the study. Conceivably, observing, interviewing, and collecting textual data related to new media (online and offline) raise new and old ethical considerations researchers need to acknowledge in the qualitative research. In the following section, I address these, further discussing the expansion of ethnographic work into online spheres.

Ethical Considerations for Online Ethnographies

“We may be moving to a situation where the pencil and notebook are being replaced by the iPhone and iPad” argue Back, Lury & Zimmer (2013). “But these devices produce new kinds of methodological problems as well as opportunities” (p. 1). Online ethnography raises the standard ethical issues related to qualitative research. Some of these relate to the process of obtaining an informed consent from participants in the study, creating an accurate portrayal of participants, caring for the anonymity of participants when needed, and overall avoiding deception while recruiting for and writing down the study (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Other ethical considerations relate to the nature of the multi-sited ethnography. Alongside these, online ethnography raises ethical questions that are unique to the online realm. In the following section I address these offline and online considerations. First, I attend the ethical complexities related to the multi-sited ethnographic account. Second, I will focus on two central ethical issues related to online ethnographies. The first is the issue of data collection through observation, also known as lurking, and the second is the ethical consideration of the blurring lines of privacy between online and offline spheres.

In the context of multi-sited ethnographies, Marcus (1998) argues: “the ethical issues in multi-sited research are raised by the ethnographer’s constant movement among different kinds of affiliations within a configuration of sites evolving in a particular research project” (p. 121). The described movement needs to be acknowledged on two levels: first, on an institutional level, sites of study should be recognized and declared in

the research IRB authorization forms. Second, sites' administrators should be informed about the research prior to data collection. The constant moving, online or offline, requires the full attention of the researcher to amendments and clarifications of the IRB application. Unable to anticipate the following few moves, a multi-sited account requires the constant ethical transparency on the ethnographer's part. Such constant correspondents with IRB systems and personal, while ethical, requires resources such as time for IRB's evaluations and response. This, in turn, might delay the ethnographer's ability to continue moving with participants, while keeping an updated IRB account. Thus, two ends of a spectrum are at risk – keeping an updated IRB application while not fully acknowledging a new site, or immersing in a new site and observing without an IRB amendment.

Each new site added to a multi-sited research requires participant's consent. This, again, leads to question of the immediacy in which data is collected. Should ethnographers refrain from documenting valuable data in a new site to which participant led them? Or should they first document and only then ask for permission from the site's administrator? The movement between sites, thus, becomes a source for ethical considerations ethnographers should attend while conducting multi-sited research. In this ethnographic project, all documented data in the multiple sites was authorized by both administrators and IRB in advance. This led to long delays in data collection processes, and prevented participation in several events online and offline. Yet, I believed that full consent and authorization are more important to this sensitive project than shorter periods of data collection.

Other ethical considerations relate to the nature of the online sphere, and particularly to online observations and lurking. Being the most common way of users conduct in online groups, lurking is defined as the lack of participation in human interactions in online platforms (Edelmann, 2013; Nonnecke & Preece, 2001). Online lurking has been marked as a widespread occurrence, argued to be found in nearly every online discussion group or forum (Ebner, Holzinger & Catarci, 2005). In fact, it was estimated over 16 years ago, that the ratio of lurkers to posters in online environments is 100:1 (Nonnecke & Preece, 1999). With the growth of social networking sites and virtual worlds, which require registration and identification, this ratio has probably changed. Nonetheless, even when registration is required, and users might be visible to others in terms of profile, user name, and the like, contribution to any discussion is not often a requirement in these platforms. That is to say, that even with the technological developments in web 2.0 internet-based media, lurking is still estimated to be a prevalent phenomenon in online spheres.

On the one hand, lurking is often perceived as a negative behavior. Scholars frequently approach lurkers as a menace for the online knowledge and culture, feeding on others' intellects without any contribution (Tagarelli & Interdonato, 2014). Lurkers are often approached as lacking a commitment to the community, receiving benefits such as inside knowledge and tips, without giving anything back (Ebner, Holzinger & Catarci, 2005). In this context, lurking behaviors of researchers themselves, studying online platforms, might also be perceived as a negative behavior. First, lurking implies an element of power, observing others and obtaining their knowledge or information

without their awareness. Second, lurking might denote a violation of the consent participation convention. Participants that are being lurked by researchers online without their knowledge do not have the option to refuse participation in a research project or review a study consent form (Richman, 2007).

On the other hand, lurking has been marked as a necessary means of conduct, positive for internet users and researchers when is not carried out in malicious ways. For example, in cases of medical issues and health related online forums, online lurkers may wish to communicate with others, but are afraid that their advice or knowledge might harm other participants. Hence, lurking is enacted out of the care to the other and not out of vice or evil (Bishop, 2007; Preece, 1999). The same applies to users that do not have the media literacy or ability to react on such platforms, but can nonetheless benefit from reading the content shared on them in terms of medical developments, information for the elderly, etc. Lurking is also seen as a learning tool for newcomers, halting participation until they are fluent with the communities' engagement norms and habits (Walther & Boyd, 2002). Hence, lurking should not be seen as one dimensionally negative or even consistent in nature. It can take many forms, be enacted in many platforms that are different in their features and essence, and thus can be ethical as well as unethical when used as an observation method in studies of online environments (Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004).

Applied in ethnographic internet research, lurking might play an important role and be necessary in early stages of a research. When entering the online research site, lurking allows the ethnographer a learning period, observing the interaction in hand

without taking part in it. Usually, as reviewed above, such behavior is common to other members of the group, and thus does not position the observing ethnographer in a unique or unusual position uncommon to the studies phenomenon. The important questions relevant to this position are: did the ethnographer ask the administrators of the online environment for permission to observe and collect data?; what other sources and methods does an ethnographer use to collect data (e.g., interviews, focus groups, etc.)?, and finally, in what way does the ethnographer obtain a consent form from participants they include in the final product? While lurking in of itself is not necessarily unethical or uncommon in online culture, lurking without permission or using data collected via lurking without members' consent, as well as relying solely on observations without other data sources, can be unethical. This has to do with the blurring lines between private and public domains online.

In many cases, online platforms (such as MUDs and bulletin boards in early internet research, and user comments nowadays) are perceived as a public domain. Murthy (2008), for example, describes in length how many researchers in the early days of the internet, did not address lurking as intruding into private spaces:

Denzin (1999: 123), for example, admits he was 'a passive, lurking observer' and never asked for permission to quote postings. Denzin's situation is hardly unique, with Schaap (2002) 'lurking' for over two years in an online role-playing-game (RPG) community. Indeed, as Kozinets (2002: 65) observes, digital ethnography's 'uniquely unobtrusive nature [...] is the source of much of its attractiveness and its contentiousness'. The only

base- line which researchers seem to concur on is that ‘we must consider the act of lurking and its implications’ on those being investigated (Richman, 2007: 183) (p. 840)

However, with the evolvement of web 2.0, and the introduction of social networking sites to the individual user, the lines between private and public online spheres have blurred. In this context, some spaces have remained clearly private—such as the private message on Facebook—and some have remained clearly public—such as the user comments section in online news sites. Nonetheless, some environments do not fall distinctly under private or public, and should raise questions pertaining to the ethical process of data collection for academic research. A closed Facebook group that requires administrators’ approval for participation, but has thousands of followers is a good example. Can it still be private if so many people populate it? Can we use the data shared in the group without the consent of the individual user sharing the data? Alternatively, can we analyze photos shared on Twitter by users that set their profile privacy to private, but share photos with public hashtags? Are these considered public or private?

Moreover, the internet’s archival nature point to questions that might not be relevant to offline research. Online ethnographers are confronted with questions about utilizing data that was not necessarily shared directly with them or at the time of conducting the research, but is archived online. A researcher can go back to older posts on forums or Facebook groups and analyze shared content. If a participant posted a story on a forum before agreeing to participate in a research, can we use this as data in our

research alongside data that was posted after obtaining consent? These ethical questions relate to the extent to which participants' personal information and personal identifiers shared in online platform can and should be used by online ethnographers without the users' consent. These become even more urgent when data collection is conducted "under cover" by lurking in online environments.

These ethical considerations have to do with the nature of online data in the web 2.0 era. Much of this data is produced by users with the wish to share (privately or publically) rather than by professional media producers. To fully understand this conceptual change, I review in the next section the new realm of convergence culture, the conceptual movement from studying media audiences to studying internet users, and the practice of ethnography in this study.

Users and Producers in Online Research

Whether focused on identity formation, or on other social processes and interactions, media ethnographies often concentrate on reception practices. Consumption became a central concept in this field of inquiry, where ethnographic exploration enables a researcher to study fluid, flexible media consumption practices through different levels of observation and participation (La Pastina, 2005). Some media related ethnographic work, however, was also conducted in the context of media production. Tuchman's (1973) research comes to mind as a noticeable example of production ethnography. Studying organization structures of newsrooms and news classification practices,

Tuchman conducted participant observations and interviews in news organizations to explain the ritualization of media content production.

While audience research scholars argue for the active role of the audience member (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974; Hall, 1980; Morley, 1993; Bird, 2001; Carpentier, 2011) there was still a somewhat clear distinction in their studies between mass media content production and mass media content consumption. The audience member, although actively decoding and even resisting media messages through processes of social meaning making, was still conceptualized as a consumer. Thus, audiences were studied through the lens of reception, and producers were studied within the perspective of creators of content, or encoders, disseminating media content to groups of audiences. Media producers and consumers often shared a culture, drawing on the same cultural interpretive framework for encoding and decoding media messages (Carey, 1989). In other cases, media products reached global markets that drew together media producers and consumers based on multiple proximities (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005).

According to Jenkins (2006) the mediascape based on older generations of media, and within it the conceptual separation between the producer and the consumer, is metamorphosing through a cultural shift he addresses as “convergence culture.” Jenkins refers in his discussion of convergence culture to new social structures and processes formed around online networks of knowledge and information. In contrast to older approaches towards media convergence, Jenkins does not view the process as solely technological. That is, by using the term convergence Jenkins does not describe

the old notion of different devices converging into one central device. Jenkins views convergence culture as a new cultural system, a meeting point of old and new media, media producers and consumers, different media narratives and industries, and different social relations and interactions. He stresses that the culture of convergence is the process that alters the way media content is produced, consumed, and carried via online and offline platforms, empowering media consumers to create, edit, and circulate amateur, semi-professional, and professional media content online. This, in Jenkins' terms, is based on participatory culture, which was discussed in details earlier in this dissertation.

Jenkins' discussion has clear methodological implications. Internet-based media researchers need to consider the new place and practice of research participants, that are now producing and circulating consumable content online but also consume it. In that sense, the rise of the 'proAms' (professional amateurs), 'former audience,' 'prosumers,' or 'prod-users' (Limonard as cited in: Bergström, 2008; Horsfield, 2012; Gillmor as cited in: Paulussen, Heinonen, Domingo & Quandt, 2007) blur the lines between production and consumption of media more than ever. The combination of producers and consumers, producing media content online, intensified the circulation of professional and non-professional media content online, exaggerating the competition between media outlets. On the one hand, producers of older generations of media content are required to pay more attention to the requests and desires of consumers who can now turn to other sources for information. Consumers, on the other hand, are no longer obligated to official information sources and can now search more easily for alternative

online sources and even create such sources themselves. Thus, convergence and participatory cultures change the traditional distinction between media producers and consumers.

This theoretical approach shifts the scholarly focus from the “audience member” to the “internet user.” The practice of media ethnographies, that was challenging enough to begin with, became even more complex. The basic, yet multifaceted, attention given the surrounding ideologies, cultural preferences, environmental influences, and individual values and attitudes in the ethnographic process (La Pastina, 2005) has changed. It is now coupled with the movement between online and offline spheres, and with the dual position (as producers and consumers) of the internet user as a research participant. Thus, the goal of online ethnographic accounts should be understanding the affordances these new roles and environments give internet users and communities, but also understanding the complexities and limitations of the studying such complex, multi-dimensional, social interactions. Based on the methodological review presented thus far, I turn to discuss the application of an online multi-sited ethnography to the case of Persian identity construction in Israel.

Methodological Application - Practicing Ethnography in the Persian-Israeli Community

In this dissertation project, I explore the relationship of post-migration community with media through online ethnography. Specifically, I look at the ways in which ethnic-

national identities are being constructed between online and offline environments in the Persian-Israeli context. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, my interest in migration and the Israeli society has been established long before I started my PhD studies. I was well immersed in the literature on migration and media as a whole, and migration to Israel in particular, as I wrote my MA thesis on the representation of immigrants and migration in Israeli children's magazines (Yadlin-Segal & Meyers, 2014). I focused in my MA project on older generations of media during the formative era of the State of Israel (1950s), and knew that I wanted to continue my work on the topic of immigration in the future. However, exploring new media and contemporary usage of them was more inviting than going back to the archive exploring microfilms and crumbling 60 years old magazines and newspapers. Experiencing such archival work and knowing how isolated this process might be, I was ready to move from textual analysis into ethnographic work in which much of the data collection is done through participation and conversation. Backed by my faculty advisors and mentors, I turned to explore the place online and digital environments play on their users' day-to-day lives.

Throughout my research on migration in Israel, it became clear to me that within the academic literature, less attention was given to the Persian community. With the growing attention to the Israeli-Iranian relations around the world, the renewed interest in the Iranian-western relationship around the nuclear negotiation, and the lifting of some western sanctions, my interest in the topic grew even bigger. Witnessing the discourse that position Iran as the opposite of the west, I became interested in studying the complexity of identity within these relations, rather than the dichotomy through

which the western-Iranian relationship was usually approached. The case of the Jewish-Iranian migration to Israel was thus a perfect case study. As I have written before, the identity and culture of Israelis of Iranian origin embody conflicting religious, national, and ethnic sources, and emphasize the complexity of cultural experiences within national and political conflicts.

Entering the Site

I started collecting data online through an observation of the Facebook group “It means you are Persian” in early February of 2014. At that stage of the process, I was not sure about the main questions or main goals of this project, and started looking into this group as part of my class work in different graduate seminars. “It means you are a Persian” (*Siman She’ata Parsi* in Hebrew) was established in early 2013 by a fifteen years old Facebook user and is administrated today by his mother and additional members of the Israeli-Persian community. The group has (as of December 2016) about 16,000 members. Its professed aim (taken from the group’s “Facebook about,” originally in Hebrew) is to share essential common Persian memories and experiences. It wishes to establish itself as the “home of the Persians” and asks the members to “preserve the Persian culture, language, shared memories, photos, stories, events, recipes, authentic Persian proverbs, and anything about Persian folklore.” Most of the group’s discussions are posted in Hebrew, and any Farsi written posts (or a Hebrew-Persian/English-Persian

constellation) analyzed in the study were translated into English by two professional Farsi translators.

This group was picked as a first site for this study for three main reasons. First, I have looked for groups and pages that discuss the Persian identity in social networking sites, and this group has been the largest Israeli group on Facebook. At the time I started, only three groups came up through the Facebook search with the word Persian in Hebrew. The two other groups had only few hundred members. Secondly, the other groups did not seem very active. “It means you are a Persian” had over 13,000 members at the time I started the project, and seemed significantly more active. The size and liveliness of the group were thus the two main reasons for starting there. Moreover, there was a simple methodological reasoning behind the selection this group in particular. The names of the groups’ administrators and the aim of the group were clearly marked in the description (“about”) section on Facebook. Thinking ahead about IRB approval and ethical conduct in the realm of online ethnographic research, I knew I would be able to more easily communicate with the administrators and reason my selection within the IRB application. This turned out to be the right choice, as the administrators were open for collaboration and highly excited to participate in my proposed study, and have been a valuable resource in this study since the initial communication with them.

I have approached the administrators of the group to get approval for conducting research in early February of 2014. IRB application was sent with the administrators’ willingness to take part in the project, and the official approval from IRB was granted on April 2014. In between these two dates, I had the chance to familiarize myself with the

group, and got to know its dynamics, types of postings, and central issues discussed. I made daily visits to the Facebook group, often multiple, to become informed about the ways in which members use it to maintain and construct their Persian identity. I kept a field journal of the topics I found relevant since then in my observation, and collected representative posts that I found relevant to my interest. These were gathered with the wish to remind myself in the analysis stages of project what I saw as the flavor of the discourse constructed there.

Sources of Data

Observation Online (or “Lurking”)

Since receiving Texas A&M University’s IRB approval and the approval of the group’s administrators, I have been conducting observation in “It means you are a Persian” for two years. The main aim of this layer of data collection was mainly contextual. I wanted to learn about the ways in which the group works, the main communication patterns, and the main themes discussed in it. More specifically, I was interested in learning about the ways in which group members discuss their Persian identity, Iranian background and memories, migration processes, and assimilation in Israel. Alongside these, I was looking for the ways they talked about the platform itself – the Facebook group. I was interested to see if and how they frame the technology’s place in gathering the group.

Other than occasional likes on others' posts in the group, and a surprising celebratory post on the group's wall on my birthday (posted by the administrators with which I was in touch throughout the research), I did not take any active part in it. The conversation in the group focused on the cultural experiences of being Persian, the memories from Iran and from growing up on Persian households in Israel, and my main activity remained in the realm of observing, or 'lurking' with a full administrative approval. Being in the very early stages of the research process, not knowing too much about the group, but having the permission of the administrators to study it, I decided to spend some time without actually posting and participating in the group, at least until a genuine opportunity for participation will present itself.

I concluded that lurking, or in a less negative context, observing, is sufficient enough for that stage of the study. Being the most common way of participation in online groups, lurking was not seen as ethically problematic (Edelmann, 2013; Nonnecke & Preece, 2001). The group administrators themselves acknowledged in several interviews that most of the participants in the studied group were only observing, and not taking active part in posting in the group. Thus, the group was at first stage just observed. This observation was not being held under cover, or through the use of an alternative Facebook account, but rather through using my own Facebook profile throughout the whole process. Additionally, I did not include any data in this study that I was not authorized to use by participants in the research. To gain a more in-depth understanding of the process, I added interviews with active members of the group to the data collection process. Thus, data collected in the observation stage was only

contextual. In this exploratory stage I collected 350 Facebook posts from the Facebook group “It Means You are Persian” to gain a better understanding of the flavor of conversations and exchange that exists in the group. Through semi-structured and ethnographic interviews, a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the identity is formulated and understood was gathered.

Semi-structured and Ethnographic Interviews

Alongside conducting observations online, I started conducting interviews with some of the groups’ administrators, to get a further understanding of the aims and goals of the group, and to understand its scope. Two administrators of the group were interviewed multiple times in this stage of the research. Through several interviews carried with these two administrators over the phone, Skype calls, Facebook messages, and Facebook chat, I have learned about the Persian identity being the main identity marker shared and presented by the group members. I became Facebook friend with the two administrators and the conversation between us has continued ever since. Communication with these two administrators has moved beyond the context of the project, and we often exchange messages in holidays, birthdays, and other occasions.

At this point, it is important to explain the different types of interviews I conducted with participants. By using the term semi-structured interviews, I refer to interviews scheduled in advance with participants, in which I followed a flexible list of questions designed in advance and approved by IRB. These questions were leading the

conversation, but the interview was not restricted to them in any way, and was highly conversational in nature. These semi-structured interviews were conducted both online and offline, on phone calls, through Skype, or in-person. Ethnographic interviews, in comparison, are those conducted without specific prior preparation. They are unstructured in nature, and are conducted as an open conversation with the participants. These were usually conducted over Facebook chat and messages, but also through Skype calls in a more spontaneous manner.

After a few interviews with the group administrators, they have offered to put me in touch a few group members that have heard about the project, and were interested in participating in the research. Thus, several more participants were added to the project, with whom a few more interviews were conducted. At that stage of my research process, I had only interacted with participants from afar, via phone, Facebook, or Skype. All interviewees were added as Facebook friends, and maintained connection with me through it after and between interviews using messages and chats, which I categorize as ethnographic interviews.

Administrators of another Facebook group, as discussed below, were also interviewed for this study. This second Facebook group is a “sub-group” (as participants refer to it) of the original “It means you are Persian,” that focuses on the Persian language. More information about this group is shared later in this chapter as part of a discussion of conducting participant observation. Through these two Facebook groups and interviews reached through them, I have learned of three different online radio stations, operated voluntarily by members of the Persian community, which broadcast

live in Farsi in Israel today. These are RadisIn,³ Radio Asal,⁴ and Radio Ran.⁵ RadisIn was closed a mere few weeks after I concluded collecting data for this study, and an additional radio station was established online by some of the volunteers who operated it. The new station, Radio Setareh, was not included in the process of data collection. Additional interviews were conducted with producers of RadisIn, Radio Asal, and Radio Ran, adding further sites to be studied both online and offline. Overall, twenty participants have been interviewed for this dissertation project. Additional interviews were conducted with other members of the Facebook group based on a snowball sampling.

Although the sampling method for this study was non-representative and non-random, I tried to conduct interviews with both female and male participants, of different age groups and backgrounds, born in Iran and in Israel, to have a taste of the different profiles and experiences of members in the group. All of the interviewees in this project were reached through the two Facebook group or through members of these groups. I have met face-to-face with over 70 members in offline meetings with which I conducted ethnographic, non-structured or planned interaction (described below), yet only 20 of them participated in in-depth interviews. Thus, 9 males and 11 females were interviewed, 11 of them born in Iran, 9 of them born in Israel (not respectively). Only one of the interviewees does not identify as Persian in ethnicity, but is an expert in

³ <http://www.radisin.com/>

⁴ <http://www.radioasal.com/>

⁵ <http://www.radioran.co.il/>

Israel-Iran relations and have worked constantly with one of the radio stations to discuss said relations, arranging visits of Iranian leading cultural figures (such as Iranian poet Payam Feili, who's visit to Israel will be further discussed in chapter 6) to promote dialogue and facilitate relations between the two. Other than this participant, all other 19 participants identify as Persian and actively participate in the radio stations or Facebook groups. Participants' age range between 18-65, and all have actively agreed to take part in the project, being interviewed multiple times online or offline.

Participant Observation Online

In one of the interviews, a participant shared with me information about her own Facebook group – “Lovers of the Persian language” (*Ohavey Hasafa Ha'Ivrit* in Hebrew, and *Dustan aziz chush amdid* in Farsi) – that became a second site of analysis in this study. This group was described by few community members as one of the “sub-groups” growing out of the original “It means you are Persian” Facebook group. It has around 4,700 followers (as of December 2016), and specifically focuses on the Farsi language, and consist of discussions of the place of the language in the Persian culture and identity. Through this group, I was able to add participant observation, the heart of the ethnographic process, to the project. The genuine opportunity for participation I was looking for, became available through this group - the group administrator, who is one of this study's participants, started teaching Farsi through online lessons shared in the

This was an excellent opportunity for me to be somewhat at “a leveled playing field” with other participants who did not know the language even though coming from a Persian background. I am still not Persian, nor will I ever be, but through these shared learning experience I was able to add participation to the already existing observation in this study. Little by little, I reached more members, added them as friends on Facebook, and become more immersed in the Facebook groups. During this ethnographic exploration, my Facebook feed got to a point in which I often saw more content posted in Farsi or by members of the Persian Facebook groups, than posts of other friends I have, posting in English or Hebrew.

Participant Observation Offline

In addition to the work conducted online, I have attended two offline meetings with members of the community while visiting Israel. These two meetings were organized by community members, and I have joined them after getting permission from both the organizer of the events and the administrators of the Facebook groups, that were my informants in the community. It was important for me to receive this approval from them, as the relationship with other members in the community was originated by them. About twenty members have attended the first informal gathering held in May 2015, some of whom I already knew and interviewed, and some of whom I only recognized from the observation part of this study. The second meeting was held in December 2015.

This was a bigger gathering, attended by around 50 members of the group, some of which I already knew, and some that I got to meet for the first time.

In these two occasions, I was able to meet participants face-to-face, and to experience with them the gatherings they have talked about many times online. The meetings included Persian food, music, and stories. In the second meeting, the host have even invited a professional Persian singer and key-board player to entertain the guests. I was able to witness how the group's online Persian identity was carried offline, as they kept mentioning the group and shared Persian food and memories in the meeting. Most participants did not know each other prior to meeting online, In the Facebook group "It means you are Persian," a fact they kept on reiterating both online and offline.

These meetings enriched the context of the research and gave it depth, focusing on the interplay between online and offline spheres that are both integral and relevant to the identity construction process. After attending these meetings, I gained more of the participants trust, and was able to meet new members that led me to another site of this study – online Persian radio. While I already learned about the radio station via the groups, I was able to meet two of the radio producers face-to-face offline in these meetings, and gain permission to add these sites to my study.

In my second trip to Israel (December 2015), I visited two Persian radio stations broadcasting live from Israel via websites – Radio Asal and Radio Ran. Following Carey's model of communication as culture, I emphasize the place of the producers in the community and in creating a Persian social hearth. Working within a community and sharing a culture with the audience, the producers of the radio broadcasts are in charge,

to some extent, of those shared symbols consumed by the community. By interviewing the producers and visiting the radio stations, I gained a sense of the imagined borders and the perceived cultural needs of the Persian “community of sentiment” (Appadurai, 1996). These visits broadened my understanding of the cultural work being done within the community and allowed me a holistic understanding of the online Persian mediascape in Israel.

While visiting Radio Asal, I was also invited to take part in the broadcasting of one of the shows, to share my research live with listeners and to ask the broadcasting crew questions about their own migration story and gather information about the place of media in forming the Persian identity in Israel. In the second station – Radio Ran, I was able to sit in the studio while the broadcasters interviewed live, in the station, Payam Feili. Feili is a Muslim Iranian poet who fled Iran in 2015 because of the persecution he faced over his sexuality. These two unique opportunities have expanded my data collection, adding depth to the understanding of the online sphere in the global context.

Textual Analysis

Another important data collection layer in the Facebook groups is a textual one. I have been tagged by the participants in comments of Facebook posts that they found representative of their Persian identity. The first participants in this study, who thought it would be easier for her to demonstrate the need of people to discuss their past and memories through those posts, originated this act. In line with Marcus’ (1998)

suggestion of “following the people” in the multi-sited ethnography, I decided to embrace this method, and have asked other participants to tag me in their own postings that seem relevant for the study. Thus, 45 posts were collected and thematically analyzed to find central motifs participants emphasize when talking about their Persian identity. In terms of translation, it is important to highlight at this point that most posts gathered were in Hebrew, or in a combination of Hebrew and Farsi that allowed me to gather an understanding of the topic in hand. The posts that were originated in Farsi and I could understand were translated into Hebrew by a professional translator that was also my Farsi language teacher in the past (prior to the beginning of this project). Overall 108 posts or comments on posts were translated by the professional Farsi translator.

This layer of analysis is important for gaining a thick, rich, and in-depth understanding of the construction process and the meaning of it for participants. Alongside my point of view gathered via observations, participation, and interviews, these Facebook posts further enable me with the participants’ point of view, with emphasis on what they find integral to their experience online. Texts of the interviews (some typed online, some recorded) as well as notes written during the interviews and throughout the observations in my field journal, were also analyzed thematically.

Through thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2012) I aimed at identifying and interpreting patterns of collective or shared meanings and experiences across the set of data collected in multiple sites online and offline. Using thematic analysis, I unpacked the salient and latent commonalities in group discussions, interviews, meetings, etc. at different levels, in order to uncover the common ways in

which participants address the role online media play in their community and in the process of forming the Persian identity.

Thus, the many layers of data in this project stem from online and offline engagements with the community. In terms of observation, I followed the community through a Facebook group for several months prior to interviewing and participating. At this stage I collected 350 contextual Facebook posts that were gathered as the exploratory phase of the project. Alongside the observational stage, participant observation was also conducted in this study as the heart of the ethnographic research. Online, I took part in a Farsi language Facebook group and a Farsi learning class for 40 lessons. Offline, I conducted two community meetings in which I interacted with about 70 community members. I also conducted multiple visits in radio stations that broadcast in Farsi from Israel, and even got to broadcast with them during one of my visits. In terms of interviews, 20 community members were interviewed for this dissertation project. This layer of data collection included multiple interviews with each of the members both offline, in person, and online, through Facebook chats, Skype conversations, and phone conversations. Alongside these, as mentioned, 45 Facebook posts were also gathered for an in-depth analysis based on participants' recommendation.

This thick and layered body of data was thematically analyzed and is brought together into use in the following chapters. In each chapter I combine examples from visits to the radio stations, participation in groups' meetings, interviews, and so on, to highlight the interconnected nature of identity construction and cultural negotiation

between the online and the offline. The conscious decision of not distinguishing between different sources of data in the following stages stems from the theoretical understanding that culture is a “web of meaning” (Geertz, 1973) that can only be understood as a whole.

Research Questions

By focusing on these data collection methods within my ethnographic research, I aim at answering the following primary research question:

What is the role online media platforms play in the process of constructing Persian identities in Israel?

Some other secondary questions studied in this dissertation are:

- A. How do community members communicate and articulate the ethnic and national layers of the Persian identity?
- B. What are the transnational and transcultural aspects of the Persian community and identity as communicated by community members?
- C. What is the place of online platforms usage in challenging mainstream notions of ethnicity, nationality, homelands, and host lands?

CHAPTER IV
NARRATIVES OF BELONGING AND ESTRANGEMENT: CONSTRUCTING
AN ETHNIC IDENTITY, BUILDING AN ONLINE HOME

“The internet media are very capable of bringing dispersed things into immediate, virtually face-to-face, contact: prices and commodities, families, music cultures, religious and ethnic diasporas. However, there is no reason to suppose that these encounters dis-embed people from their particular places; or that they come to treat their real-world locations as less relevant to their encounters or identities; or that they construct new identities in relation to ‘cyberspace’ rather than projecting older spatial identities through new media” (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 85).

This chapter focuses on contextualizing the Persian identity as members of the Persian community construct it within Israeli society. In order to understand the formation of the Israeli Persian identity (rather than Persian identity in Iran or other exiled Persian communities worldwide) I focus on the social and cultural circles relevant to the process. I open the chapter with stories of migration and assimilation shared by participants online and offline. I then turn to unpack the meaning of using online media in light of these stories. This section focuses on the different themes that build the ethnic Persian identity in Israel, ranging from the Persian calendar, through the Persian cuisine, all the way to hybrid media texts produced and consumed locally and globally. The analysis portion of the chapter closes with a discussion of the culturally subversive vs.

affirmative nature of the discourse produced by community members. These three sections are then interpreted within the larger context of new media studies and ethnic identity studies. In this final part of the chapter I define a term I coined—“lived ethnicity”—focusing on the dynamic essence of studying and constructing ethnic identities online.

Migration and Assimilation Narratives between Iran and Israel

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, the Zionist ethos constructed Jewish migration to Israel during the 20th century as a “returning to a Homeland” and to a “patrimony.” The stories participants share attest otherwise, somewhat supporting somewhat challenging this social perception. Members of the Persian community share stories that reveal the hardship of migrating to Israel, stories about the complicated assimilation process in Israel, and above all, stories that are not consistent with the ideological narrative of the almost “magical” returning of Jewish people to Israel from all ends of the globe. Alongside these accounts, participants also share stories about being and becoming a part of the Jewish Israeli society, Zionist at heart and supporters of the Israeli state. These tensions, as shown throughout the analysis chapters, are the main theme in the story of the Persian ethnic identity in Israel. Thus, in the following sections of this ethnographic account, I present a pendulum movement between affirming and negating social structures, cultural norms, and ethnic hierarchies, as these are presented

by participants online and offline. These, in turn, lead to constant movement between belonging and estrangement within and between Iran and Israel.

In the context of migration, many participants share their own memory of leaving Iran, focusing on leaving a homeland, rather than returning to one. Eve, one of the administrators of the Facebook group “It means you are Persian” emphasizes a feeling of displacement in one of her interviews, providing the first example of many of the trauma formed by migration. Moving to Israel as teenager, just as the Iranian revolution commenced, Eve felt like the ground was vanishing under her feet. She refers to migrating as the biggest distress of her life, and describes her lack of commitment or connection to Israel at the time: “I heard maybe once that I have a grandmother and a grandfather in Israel, but it did not mean anything to me back then, I did not even know what Israel means or where it was. Moving to this place, back then, was not a wish or a dream I had.” Migrating to Israel, for her, was tied with feelings of displacement and losing a sense of self.

Eve grew up in western Iran, in a highly diverse society, and went to a secular Iranian school rather than a Jewish one. Most of her friends were not Jewish, and her main identity marker, as she recalls it, was being Persian. In Israel, Eve was not able to maintain this ethnicity as her main marker of identification. She expands in one of her interviews about what I interpret as the unrealistic expectations the Israeli society had towards immigrants in this context:

Alongside the trauma of losing your home, your friends,
everything you knew, I was also asked to change my name. When we

arrived at Israel the migration officer did not like the sound of my name, arguing that it is too foreign sounding, that people in Israel will find it hard to pronounce, and insisted on changing it to a Hebrew name. That was the final straw for me. My parents moved me from Iran to Israel, I had to leave everything behind – but taking my name away from me was taking who I am, taking my identity from me. I did not let them change it, I was not ready to give up who I am.

Changing migrants' "foreign sounding" first and last names into Hebrew names was not unique to Eve's migration story. Others participants in this project have run into the same situation, which signals the larger transformation immigrants from Iran, but from other places of origin as well, were asked to go under. Stahl (1994) argues that this process is found to be severely resented amongst immigrants to Israel, viewed as a cultural and ethnic intolerance on the Israeli assimilating society's part. Participants in this study share that these expectations for personal transformation often led to feelings of alienations, and negate the experience of "coming back" to a Homeland, in which you are supposed to feel welcomed. "Even many years after migrating to Israel I did not feel at home," Eve adds.

We were very happy and wealthy in Iran, we did not feel persecuted, we were not strangers, we lived in peace with all neighbors, and that was our home. There are many old sayings in Farsi that mean 'your home is your hold on reality.' When we left our home... I felt out of place. It took me a while to learn the [Hebrew] language in Israel. I tried

too hard to preserve all that I brought with me from Iran in terms of values and beliefs... which made me uncomfortable in Israel. At the end, I had to fit in. I changed and became somewhat a part of the society.

Anna, an administrator of the Facebook group focused on Farsi language expands on the topic, sharing similar feelings of post-migration displacement:

I was in my formative years, a teenager who wanted to feel a part of something bigger, just like anyone else. When my father told us we were leaving Iran, in 1988, I felt like someone tore my roots, ripped me from my ground, from everything I knew and loved, from my habitat. Once I got to Israel, all I knew was how to continue ripping these roots even farther. Do not get me wrong – I had a very strong Jewish identity even in Iran. But, my homeland was Iran, not Israel. When we arrived at Israel, I learned that I had to discard any memory of me being Iranian, or of me being Persian. I stopped speaking Farsi, I ignored my past, I tried to be as similar as possible to a *Sabar*, including my looks, my friends, my culture, the whole thing. Only years after, through Facebook and the interest I found on it in the Farsi language, I started healing these roots, growing them back again, bringing back my Persian identity into my life.

Other participants describe the migration process as a disheartening event that shook the ground beneath them, taking away everything they had, or taking them from an advanced country with everything they needed (Iran), to a backwards place with no technology, culture, or any of the lifestyle they had (Israel). Migration itself and the

early period of assimilation in Israel (for some several months for some even a few years) are mostly portrayed for what the state and the migrants themselves lacked.

The complexity of achieving a sense of belonging unfolds in the life story of Shelly, who describes her search of identity through anecdotes about migration. In this section I bring her story almost as a whole, with the hopes of showing the convoluted process of not only building an identity, but also coming to peace with this identity's multiple, often conflicting, layers. "My early childhood memories" Shelly opens the interview "take me back to the word longing." While all other immigrants participating in this project have migrated once, from Iran to Israel, Shelly's story of migration contains of multi-directional movement between Iran, Israel, and the U.S., ending up in Israel.

"I remember a pen inscribing on white rice papers, while my mother's tears smudge off the ink as she writes letters to her sisters, brothers, and other family members back in Iran." And just like the ink on the letters could not adhere, blurred by the tears of her mother, Shelly's sense of identity was always unclear.

When we came to Israel [1960s], my father was ecstatic. He joined *Mapai* [Ashkenazi-dominated Labor Party, hegemonic force at the time in terms of culture and politics] and traveled the country coast-to-coast, side-to-side, coming back home with heroic stories about the IDF [Israeli Defense Force], about planting Orange trees along unpaved roads, and about our young country, and I eagerly absorbed it all, captivated by his stories. I

was learning how to be a Zionist alongside the constant yearning, longing, and sadness of leaving Iran.

[...] we lived next to other migrating families, and there was a stubborn sense of poverty in the air. It was not necessarily economic poverty, but rather a cultural one. I had a warm and caring family, but we never fully felt like a part [of the Israeli culture]. Family members visiting from Iran brought familiar scents and scenes in the image of gifts, festive attire, expensive pistachios, and other foods; filling our humble home with our past. These made me confused; a feeling that over the years evolved and changed into a great sense of guilt and of missing out... these visits undermined and disrupted our acclimation process in Israel. The joy of seeing my family was enormous, and so was the pain of saying goodbye time and time again.

“When I was 12, my parents decided to move back to Iran, what I saw at first as leaving the Israeli-Zionist reality in favor of Teheran.” However, the reality Shelly describes was not as simple as just moving back home. First of all, Shelly’s parents and siblings gave up their Iranian passports when they migrated to Israel, as many other migrants did, and had to wait for the Iranian government to approve their relocation in 1973. Other than that, there were emotional and ideological components to being in Israel, despite the hardship. The family did not just leave Israel behind and never looked back, rather, migrated with a strong Zionist identification that was coupled with the

longing for the Iranian homeland. Shelly describes this moment of migration as identity crises:

I remember some one hundred friends and family members waiting for us in Teheran's airport, hugging and kissing us, welcoming us back home. It was a true bliss, the good life – reloaded. But, we came back as Israelis, not as Iranians, an identity that revealed itself on a day-to-day basis, further confusing me as a child. In those years [1970s] the Israeli community in Iran numbered around two thousand people: diplomats, security personal, delegates, business men and women, and so on. Hence, an Israeli school was built in Teheran, named after David Ben-Gurion [the first Israeli Prime Minister]. My parents registered us [Shelly and her siblings] to the Israeli school, and we continued our formal education under the Israeli ministry of education – in Teheran.

We continued our beloved Israeli routine in the heart of bustling Teheran, not fully in the east, not fully in the west, somewhere in-between. In the mornings, I was an Israeli in a jeans and a plain T-shirt, and in the afternoon, I had to transform, changing my colors, wearing haute-couture dresses, allowing myself to fit with the Persian and Iranian community in galas and banquets, not really knowing who I am and what I am.

[...] a few years before the revolution, while living in Los Angeles for school [UCLA], I met a young Israeli delegate who worked in Teheran. He became my husband and we experienced the revolution

together in Iran. We had to leave to Israel without my family who stayed in Teheran at the time. During those years in Israel, I had to set my Persian identity—which at times I loved and at times I ridiculed—aside. Being Persian became a memory, crumbs of my past that occasionally resurfaced. That is, until I found Facebook.

Shelly goes on and describes her new home – the Facebook group “It Means you are Persian,” a narrative that will be further explored later in the chapter.

As shown, Shelly’s story challenges the linear Zionist migration story on several levels. Shelly’s story reveals that a homeland is not just an ethos, rather a deeper sense of belonging that is not dictated by ideology. It reveals the simultaneous sense of belonging and estrangement leading families to wander the world in a journey to construct a comprehended identity. The hardship she and her family felt manifested itself in varying ways, leading Shelly to adopt a dual identity, one that does not sit with the Jewish-Israeli image of the *Sabar*. This, in turn, led her to further feelings of confusion and rupture.

It was not only leaving Iran that was hard for the Persian community members. Assimilation in Israel was more than often difficult as well. Lara looks back at the first months in Israel after immigrating. She arrived at Israel as a 15 years old teenager, right as the revolution happened. In contrary to some of the stories shared by now, Lara grew up as a Zionist, visited Israel many times prior to the revolution, and was in fact highly excited to migrate to Israel. However, upon arrival, the situation in Israel was different than she expected. “Many of us kids immigrated without our parents, or with only one parent, which made boarding school necessary. It was not because our parents could not

take care of us,” Lara stresses, “we were loved and cared for, but in order for our parents to situate the family in Israel they needed help with accommodating us first.” So, Lara was sent to an Israeli boarding school, where she met other Persian youth who recently immigrated to Israel. She also met many Israeli youth, born and raised in Israel. The difference between the two groups was, according to her, fundamental. The native Israeli youth at the place were forced out of their homes due to lack of parental care and the lack of familial supervision. Many of them were troubled individuals, and interaction with them was very problematic.

“First we were completely separated from the Israelis. Looking back at those years I see it as a problem. The institution forced us to be separated and did not let us assimilate easily,” Lara sees that as the first obstacle in her assimilation process. Other than having different social values and norms, she remembers how she and her Persian friends were “abused by the Israeli group. It was only verbal abuse but still, it was very hard for me as a young girl. I had to grow up very quickly, to develop a thick skin.” The assimilating Israeli group in the boarding school used to call the Persian migrants “*Farsi-Miduni*” (in Farsi: “you know Farsi,” a theme that has surfaced in each and every interview conducted for this project, and will be further discussed soon), or “Khomeini” as an insult. Khomeini was the leader of the Iranian revolution of 1979, a Shia Muslim Ayatollah, inscribed in the Israeli collective memory as the ultimate enemy. Using his name as a nickname of migrants from Iran made the assimilating group’s position clear to the immigrating youth. The assimilating group went as far as equalizing the Iranian immigrants to enemies, othering them from the Israeli society. Other participants shared

similar stories of ostracism, where even educators in later years have addressed the alleged hostile characters of the Persian community immigrated from Iran.

Orly, who also immigrated to Israel from Iran shortly after the revolution, shares her perspective on assimilation in a blog post (Noy, 2013) she published about the Facebook group “It means you are Persian:”

In my childhood, as an immigrant from Iran, I was the ultimate ‘Persian,’ always uttered mockingly. I am not sure I understood why pointing out my ethnic origin was supposed to embarrass me, but it sure got the job done: I was ashamed to be called Persian; I was ashamed to be Persian. When they [Israelis, members of the assimilating group] really wanted to get under my skin, they would call me *Farsi-Miduni*, as a curse. “*Farsi-Miduni*” literally means [in Farsi], “you know Farsi.” Or as a question, “Do you know Farsi?,” and I did. I spoke Farsi at home. When I was sad, my parents consoled me in Farsi. At the dinner table they made me laugh in Farsi and when I misbehaved, they scolded at me in Farsi. Yes, I know Farsi.

It did not take me much time to shed my “Persianness.” I worked hard to shed the remnants of my accent and perfect my Hebrew, to the point that within two years I was the best student in Hebrew class. Consciously or unconsciously I began to put my Farsi into a box, so that as much as possible, it wouldn’t leave the house: I was Persian at home, and a “human” on the street... I became Israeli, “transparent.” My parents

cooperated with me in my assimilation project as best as they could (I never dared to find out how much anguish it caused them). They refrained from playing Persian music when I had friends over and from speaking Farsi in public. Farsi went away and was locked up in the confines of my home. The language of my culture, on which I was raised, turned into a language that was intimate, familial, and practically secret.

The described wish of shedding any Persian identity marker was not the possession of only migrating individuals. Nir, the son of two Iranian immigrants (his father migrated from Shiraz and his mother migrated from Teheran) describes how the shame of holding on to ethnic identity markers has also passed on to second generation of Iranian migrants in Israel. “When I was a child and a teenager,” says Nir, “being Persian was wrong. Being a migrant was wrong, holding ethnic identity that was not of a native-Israeli *Sabar* was wrong. But I felt that being Persian was the ultimate way to be wrong.” He expands on the experience and what he felt as the turmoil of being a son of Persian parents in the Israeli society during the 1980s and 1990s:

Every time my parents played Farsi music at home, I used to go around the house and close all of the doors and windows so that no one outside would know what we are listening to. I also did not let my father turn on the car radio if a friend of mine was riding along. I knew that once he turns it on, Farsi music would play, and I did not want my friends to know. I completely denied this identity. I was even ashamed of it. A Persian person was a laughingstock, the subject of so many jokes, the

ridiculed character in Israeli movies... so when I was asked about my background I often lied. I would say I am Ashkenazi, Moroccan, Iraqi, anything but Persian.

Thus, being Persian in Israel became a burden for many of the community members, making them look for creative ways to hide this identity and shed any ethnic identification. This does not mean that other groups were not stigmatized or stereotyped in ways similar to the Persian community. However, being Persians, participants in this study attest to their own experiences, which they might perceive as more intensified than other minority groups' similar experience in Israel.

At the same time, many members share similar stories of hardship as they describe their life in Iran. Numerous times the topic of anti-Semitism comes up in group discussions on Facebook, and the overall fear that followed the community's life both before and after the revolution became a recurring theme as well. In terms of estrangement and liminality, being a religious minority in Iran is presented by community members as similar to being an ethnic minority in Israel. These feelings of dual estrangement were slowly simmering for the past few decades, fostering a state of marginalization in both societies, but more critically, it created a sense of ostracism in Israel, the hegemonically perceived homeland of the Jewish Persian community.

It is important to understand these narratives of alienation early in the chapter, to further stress the prominence of online platforms in the process of Persian identity construction in Israel. Here, I aim at showing that online environments allow members of the Persian community in Israel to negotiate the understanding of being Iranian and

Israeli, Persian and Jewish, all at once. This is not to say that these environments enable users with unlimited degrees of social and cultural freedom. As I show throughout this analysis chapter and the two that follow, many members affirm and re-create negative and oppressive social structures through these platforms. However, by contrasting the lack of ethnic and cultural freedom community members have experienced before getting to know and use online environments as tools of identity construction, and the sense of belonging and community they experienced after, I discuss the important role these outlets play in their lives.

To engage this discussion, I focus in the remainder of this chapter on the ethnic aspect of participants' identity. This is done by following the use of online media to create and maintain a sense of ethnic identity, and the movement of cultural forms between online and offline environments. It is important to also point out that alongside this ethnic identity marker, participants formulate additional layers of identity such as national, religious, and global identity. Given that many times these layers are imbricated, the distinction between the ethnic layer and other layers is analytical, aims at highlighting practices of formulating both belonging and estrangement, pointing out both inclusion and exclusion within and between different circles of identification.

The Persian identity formulated by community members in Israel becomes, in a way, an enclave within and between four larger communities. First, it is an ethnic identification within the larger Jewish national group in Israel. This means that community members use online environments to stress the uniqueness of this post-migration community within the context of living in a national society in Israel, a theme

that will be discussed in-depth in the following chapter. Second, this identity is also an ethnic tradition within the larger religious Jewish community in Israel. Here, members stress specific religious traditions and customs identified only with the Persian ethnicity.

Thirdly, an additional community of reference is that of the metaethnic group, the Mizrahi group in Israel. Members of the Persian community act to include themselves under the larger Mizrahi group in Israel, but at the same time clearly distinct themselves from other “inferior” sub-groups in this cultural category. Thus, in the Israeli context, members work to formulate their unique identity both on national, religious, and meta-ethnic levels. Fourth and finally, being Persian, as expressed by community members online and offline, is also a religious-ethnic stream/trend within the global Persian community. Members of the Persian community in Israel highlight the distinct Jewish characteristics experienced within the larger Persian context in Iran, but also in the Persian diaspora outside of Iran nowadays. Here participants also address the exiled Jewish Iranian community worldwide (outside of Iran or Israel) as part of the group. By addressing these four circles, community members in Israel create themselves a home, which is context dependent. The circles are often coupled and only randomly acknowledged, but exist and define the identity formulated by the community. In the following paragraphs, I unpack this convoluted assessment through examples shared in interviews, meetings, and in online spaces.

Along Came Facebook: Social Media as a Home

After years of rejecting their ethnic identity, an outcome of the Israeli melting pot, participants attest that they were finally able to reclaim their ethnic heritage, all through online environments. This is true for both members who immigrated themselves and for second and third generation Persians who were born in Israel. “The group fulfills my need to feel a sense of belonging,” says Leon, a participant that was born in northern Israel during the 1960s, a son of Iranian immigrants. Today, an educator in a high school, Leon find the group as an important resource in his life. In the process of documenting his parents’ immigration story, Leon came across the Facebook group “It means you are Persian” and found it as a place for information gathering and affirming. “I needed help with translations from Farsi to Hebrew... help filling up gaps in stories I heard as a child from my parents about the life of the community in Iran, I needed more information about locations in Iran, all which I found in the group.” In the Facebook group, Leon also found long lost family members also living in Israel, with which his family lost contact after migrating. “There was a cultural need waiting to be met, a need to feel a part of a community” that this group provides him with.

The anecdote shared by Shelly earlier in this chapter ended with the sentence “that is, until I found Facebook.” Shelly then goes on and recounts the revelation of other members of the Persian community online:

Facebook is THE invention of our lifetime. As I was clicking the ‘like’ button on a video a friend shared on Facebook her profile, I slowly read

the words on the post – “I-t m-e-a-n-s y-o-u... are? What? Persian!”

Intrigued, without knowing what the future holds for me, I peek at the posts shared in the group, and... WOW!... someone get me unplugged!!!!

At once, without any stages or processing, I was sucked into what I can only call a home. A home that is so familiar and so tinged with mixed-memories, unvisited for so many years.

[...] Voices of laughter heard from the computer room pulled the rest of the family into this big celebration. Unexpectedly, my children, my Israeli children, call me in strange times of day, telling me jokes in Farsi, report to each other on another post someone uploaded to the group. They are suddenly interested; ask questions about my past, and even go as far as learning old Persian poems by heart, playing songs by Moein [famous Iranian singer and songwriter] on their guitar... joy and excitement in *Shushan*!!!

Selly’s reference to *Shushan*, or in English Susa, is not accidental or random.

Shushan was the capital of the first Persian Empire, during the Jewish Babylonian captivity of the 6th century BCE. *Shushan*, mainly in the Hebrew Bible scroll of Esther, is the place in which Esther, a member of the Jewish community in Persia, became a queen, married King Ahasueurus (Xerxes), and saved the Jewish people from genocide. This event is celebrated every year during *Purim* by Jewish people, commemorating the saving of the Jewish people, but also remembering the long-standing history of the Jewish people in Persia, also known as – Iran. Through this reference, Shelly points out

one of the most important component of the process of the Persian ethnic identification and identity formation – collective memory. Whether memory of the near past (one's own home in Iran) or the very far past (6th century BCE), members of the Persian community emphasize their shared history as a central element in the process of formulating a shared sense of ethnic identity.

Ethnic Identity and Collective Memory

Collective memory is the way in which a group remembers its past, a social performance that has political and cultural implications (Zelizer, 1995). Collective memory “distorts the past for the sake of affect... the means for holding onto and reaffirming identities which had been badly bruised by the turmoil of the times,” filling a central function in creating the self-image of communities (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2000, p. 421; Kraidy, 2005). And so, through shared memories, members of the Persian community reinstituted a sense of home online, publicly discussing what was thus far confined to the privacy of their physical home, re-formulating an identity that was for years dismissed.

“When I first logged-in to the Facebook group,” says Anna “all the jokes, the songs, other members’ stories, and pieces of memories immediately took me back home.” The past that slowly receded into the background of her life, was now brought back online. “I got my identity back,” Anna says. “First online, and then also offline. I started speaking Farsi with friends I met there, reading books and poetry in Farsi, singing songs in Farsi. You have to understand, these are things I never did outside of

my home before.” For Anna, the Facebook group “It means you are Persian” was a first connection to her roots, to her home, one that she left behind and started piecing together in Israel many years after migrating.

Ronen, another administrator of the language group shares this analogy: “If Facebook is a street, then our Persian Facebook group is a home.” He calls it a home because it became a space in which members talk about everything they brought from home. “You allow yourself to not only talk about being Persian, but to actually be one,” he adds, an important acknowledgment considering the narratives members shared about the shame of identifying as Persians in the past. Members of the Facebook groups exemplify this approach in their posts and comments. One member shared a video clip from a 1974 Iranian movie, asking the group to help her find the full movie. A comment following the post stated “you took me 45 years back to my childhood memories.” Others comment on similar posts states “we used to watch this at home” or “my parents used to watch these movies back in Iran.” It appears that remembering becomes a central activity in the process of re-building a home and re-constructing an identity.

Just like movies, music becomes a mean for demonstrating nostalgia and memories in the group. One of the members addressed the group, looking for an old Persian song she used to listen to as a child in Iran. The conversation around this request unfolds a walk down memory lane for many of the group members, recalling their father listening to the song in the evening, or mother singing along with the singer in their childhood home, or when she puts them to bed at night. Another member shared a song of the Persian singer Googoosh (Faegheh Atashin) to express her longing to her

deceased mother, and a posted song of the singer Ahdieh received several comments stating “this is just like home” or “this bring back memories.”

The narrative of sentimentality and nostalgia is noticeable in many other posts and comments, where members of the group share songs in Farsi and nostalgic Iranian playlists from YouTube, as well as photos of CDs and old vinyl records of Persian music they own. Holding on to these memories, but also to physical artifacts such as vinyl records, home décor, serving dishes, old coins, and above all – an Iranian passport, become an asset in the context of the group. Those who brought these items with them from Iran have more to show than those who were born in Israel. The physical artifacts that were brought from Iran to Israel play the role of valuable cultural capital in the process of remembering and building the Persian identity in Israel. This is an interesting approach to online-offline spheres relations, as it was the online sphere that enabled members of the community to come together, yet offline monuments that represent past memories still play a significant role in determining the authenticity of one’s identity.

In this context, Davidson (2011) asks: “what is a homeland without access to the materiality of the land?” (p. 43). Focusing on the virtual experiences of migrating communities, Davidson suggests that actualization of a homeland is necessarily carried through the “residue that gathers” (p. 43), that is, monuments, artifacts, photos, videos, and the like. In the online context, the materiality of the land itself and the artifacts migrated online might be lost, but the importance of them is not. The images of personal belongings brought from Iran become the blueprints of the Persian identity in Israel, of memory, and of nostalgia. Following Davidson’s argument, the images of material

artifacts become the actualization of a space members work to articulate online. This is done through the meditation of a place they call home.

It is not only nostalgic music and artists from the past that community members refer to. Many of the posts are concerned with about current Persian musicians, both from Iran and from the larger Persian diaspora around the world. While cultural recollection is integral and prominent in the process of identity construction, it is not a static nor only past-related identity. Current cultural influences are important component of the Persian identity, and online media play a central role in consuming and circulating it.

Identity and Hybrid Media Texts

Other than music shared through online music services (e.g. YouTube and Vimeo), members share and discuss media text that reflect processes of constructing the Persian identity. Members mention the Iranian TV series, *Shahzad*, produced and screened in Iran since 2015. The plot follows the 1953 Iranian coup d'état of the Iranian Prime Minister Mosaddiq, and brings pre-revolution Iranian scenes back to life. Additionally, members discuss contemporary movies that follow the post-revolutionary migration stories of Iranian families. These include the recent French drama-comedy 'All Three of Us' and the Israeli drama 'Baba June' (which was awarded the Israeli Academy Award for best film). Both depict, in different ways, the journey that many community members went through themselves, leaving Iran and re-building themselves abroad. Through these

media texts, members surface shared concerns about longing, changing cultures, and assimilation.

To these media texts, members add Persian-Israeli YouTube channels producing Farsi content and Persian-American streaming sources broadcasting mostly in Los Angeles, that allow them additional contemporary, up-to-date, sources of cultural texts to draw on. Some even go as far as producing these hybrid media texts themselves. Facebook group members create translated videos of famous old and contemporary Farsi songs, uploading them to YouTube so that members who do not know Farsi can listen to but also understand the meaning.

Others, such as Nir, create new songs, mixing Hebrew and Farsi, about the community's life in Israel. Nir is the same group member who told me how years ago he would not let his friends know he was Persian. Today, he uses Facebook and YouTube to circulate these hybrid Persian-Israeli media texts, becoming an attractive performer in weddings and other celebrations of the community. "Online media helped me connect with my roots" he shares with me. "We listened to Persian music at home before, but it was only when I uploaded the song I wrote, Iranian Bride, to YouTube that I have learned about all of those people who hold the same feelings as mine."

Those feelings, as Nir describes them, are the longing and nostalgia coupled with the wish to feel a sense of belonging in Israel. 'Iranian Bride' is a song that address the many desirable characteristics of the Iranian wife, which is the reason his family members arrange him a marriage with one. Nir's songs are hits within the community, in

which he became a celebrity, and is known as “Nir the Persian.” His hybrid media texts spreading online are, in a way, his mea culpa.

Contemporary hybrid media texts, more than reflecting cultural plurality, reflect the need of the Persian community in Israel for cultural materials and forms that pertain to them and their culture. Other scholars focused on media consumption and migration (such as Kraidy (2005) and Naficy (1993; 2001)) point out the global moment in the consumption of such texts. Globalization enabled migration of not only people but also media texts. While it is hard to argue that Israel was closed to, or disconnected from, global media penetration, these kinds of texts, hybrid or originally from Iran, were rarely available if available at all. Some offline media was produced locally in Israel, but never received large distribution even within the community. These hybrid media texts, produced by both users and media companies, and circulated by online media users, present different identity narratives than the ones offered by mainstream Israeli media. For that, these media texts become central in the conversations of community members, and prominent sources of association. Online, these processes of identifications become even clearer than offline, as users actively seek out and share these texts. The texts-pool becomes much larger and enables users to articulate their sense of belonging and sense of self through and by media content outside the Israeli mainstream mediascape.

Ethnic Identity and the Yearly Calendar

Going back to the community's collective memory and the identity constructed through it, ongoing annual rituals are signaled as other important ethnic events. Highly valuable sources of identification for group members are rituals brought from the life of the community in Iran to the life of the community in Israel. Drawing on the Persian calendar, members of the community mention and celebrate Persian holidays and practice ethnic rituals related to them. Thus, the yearly calendar becomes a central piece of collective memory. Members share multiple examples of these celebrations online. The *Noowruz* (نوروز, Persian/Iranian new years' eve) celebration and the related *Chaharshanbe Suri* (چهارشنبه سوری, Persian festival of fire) events are two occasions extensively discussed and celebrated by community members. Many upload photos of their holiday table (Figure 4 for example), including seven items starting with the Farsi letter Sin (for example, *Sabzeh*, green sprouts symbolizing renewal and rebirth; *Seer*, garlic, which symbolizes health, or *Seeb*, an apple, symbolizing beauty) proudly re-creating Persian symbolic rituals in Israel. Alongside these items, celebrants place on the table copies of Persian poetry books, honoring the rich ancient Persian culture. Many community members also meet for birthday celebrations, sharing photos of these same seven items used in birthday events to celebrate a member's new year of life.

An even more interesting event celebrated by the Persian community in Israel is the *Rooze Bagh* (روز باغ) a holiday associated with the 13th and last day of the New Year celebrations. During that day, families go out to nature to celebrate renewal and rebirth.

This day usually coincides with the last day of the Jewish Passover holiday, in which Jewish religious law allows eating *Chametz* (leavened foods), which are restricted during the holiday. The two celebrations were folded into one back in Iran, and were brought with Iranian immigrants to Israel. Thus, in Israel, the community started celebrating the event in large gatherings in a national park in Ramat Gan (a city in central Israel), playing and dancing to Persian music, eating Persian foods, and coming together with friends and family members. In light of the large number of Persian community members attending the event, the day became also known as the best day for matchmaking within the community. The role of matchmaking was transferred online. Members use the different Facebook groups to seek a match couples from within the community for themselves or friends and family members. The offline event itself also found its way online, celebrated through photos, memes, and videos (of Persian content but also of the gathering itself), marking the hybrid Persian identity formulated in Israel.



Figure 4, Festive Persian table arrangement, reprint from It means you are Persian Facebook group, 2015

More than the cultural artifacts displayed in these celebrations, the Persian calendar itself becomes a powerful cultural tool. As Schudson (1989) points out, the calendar is a prominent storage space for cultural symbols. Its efficacy becomes even greater when it is presented as part of other key cultural storage institutions: educational textbooks, literary or musical canons, and the like. Thus, “[t]he calendar, as an instance, is certainly one of the most important knowledge-fixing (and knowledge-activating) mechanisms ever invented” (p. 163). Benjamin (1968/2007) also highlight the importance of time in the social context. History, he claims, is a strong socialization tool. Constructing time through yearly calendars becomes a task of empowerment and of demonstrating social power. Calendars, rather than measure time as clocks, “are monuments of a historical consciousness” (p. 261).

Yet, the Persian calendar was never an integral part of any Israeli canon, educational instruments, or cultural mainstream. In fact, mainstream voices worked hard, in the Israeli context, to mute, suppress, and exclude ethnic identification from the cultural Jewish-Israeli repertoire. The calendar, important as it may be as a cultural tool, needs a cultural storage institution to support it and spread it within a community for it to have meaning. Thus, social media as a whole, and Facebook in particular, become these cultural vehicles, or cultural repositories, allowing the Persian community members to re-activate through culture, symbols, and canons, the suppressed Persian identity.

These events point out the fluid movement between online and offline spheres in terms of culture and identity. Many of the participants highlight the “real-world”

implications these online groups had in their lives. They refer to the sudden dominance of their Persian identification in their lives. Their circle of friends has fundamentally changed, including more and more members of the community. Their day-to-day lives are now filled with events related to the Persian community. When they meet with these new-old friends, the meetings focus on Persian culture and memories. They sing Persian songs, eat Persian food, and speak Farsi. “An outsider would not understand what it means for many of us,” says Rona, a member of the community who was born in Israel only a few months after her parents migrated from Iran in the 1950s. “It goes back into our most private moments with our parents, in our home, the only place in which we were truly Persian.” Rona also mentions the great happiness of returning to the culture she received from her parents. “Now I know I am not the only one who felt it, who needed it, who was filled with emotions every time I logged into Facebook.” Moving the online to the offline, Rona was able to start cooking Persian food, take part in the community’s events, share her childhood stories growing up in a Persian household in Israel, and once again – communicate in Farsi.

The Farsi Language

The Farsi language plays a germane role in rebuilding the Persian identity in Israel. Many members share Persian songs, internet memes, and photos with attached translation in order to demonstrate proficiency in Farsi, and in order to help the ones that do not know how to read and write in Farsi. The language is presented in different

constellations, in which members playfully mix Hebrew, English, and Farsi. Thus, funny discussions are often shared, explained in Hebrew later by the users sharing them. In the same way, words' pronunciation is often explained using English, where Hebrew explanation makes less sense. In other cases, members simply translate Farsi to Hebrew. One of the members commented on such a post, warning members who are not proficient in Farsi – “this group gradually learns to read and write Farsi, and hopefully in one year the Farsi language will dominate at least 90% of the group's posts while Hebrew will become a marginal Language.” Sharing aphorisms, proverbs, and sayings in Farsi become regular means of poetically communicating the community's identity in the past and present. These have great cultural value, building the place of the Israeli-Jewish Persian community within the larger Persian society, while admiring a language considered ancient and unique in of its own. It is also an important example of the ways in which members articulate the unique localized Persian culture created in Israel, drawing on multiple sources to establish itself online.

In addition, the Farsi language becomes a sign of acceptance for many of the participants. The revival of the language amongst the young generation born in Israel signals for parents born in Iran that their native-Israeli children are not experiencing the same levels of shame and ethnic repression they used to experience. “While I was visiting friends for *Shabbat* dinner, one of their daughters, also a member in the [Facebook] group, asked her grandmother to teach her Farsi in weekly meetings,” says Noa, an active member of both Facebook groups. “In my generation people were embarrassed of their Farsi speaking grandparents.” Eve adds in the same regard “my children, that were born in

Israel, call me on the phone to tell me jokes in Farsi they read on the Facebook group, or ask me to translate songs for them... something that I never dreamt could happen in Israel.”

Thus, by using the Farsi language, the community moves between two social ends – belonging and estrangement – within and between the Israeli society and the worldwide Persian community. In a similar way to the calendar, language helps the community to resurface the depth and copiousness of the ancient Persian culture, highlighting their ethnic identity component within the Israeli society. At the same time, the acceptance of the language in Israel by the younger generation, points out to higher levels of plurality experienced in the Israeli society. This plurality might not be experienced by all groups of the Israeli society on all social and cultural levels. However, in comparison to past experiences of the Persian community, these new forms of acceptance by younger generation points at possible cultural changes.

The Persian Cuisine

The usage of Farsi language is accompanied by long discussions, many photos, shared recipes, and countless questions about the Persian kitchen. Community members upload documentation of their weekend family meals that include traditional Persian items cooked by family members. These become in a way a stamp of approval for one's authentic Persian self. Additionally, by pointing out culinary traditions, members further distinct themselves from other members of the Jewish community in Israel. For example,

members of the community upload videos during the Passover holiday of family members singing the song *Dayenu* (literally means: it would have been enough for us). This thousand years old Hebrew song, traditionally sang during Passover reading of the *Hagada*, expresses the gratefulness of the Jewish people to God for freeing them out of slavery in Egypt, and giving them the *Torah* and the *Shabbat*. The unique Persian tradition includes the act of playfully whipping one another with green onions during the song's chorus in remembrance of the Jewish people beaten by whips as slaves in Pharaoh's Egypt. Such esoteric tradition becomes a central theme when discussing the unique habits of this community, pointing out the unique food-related Persian habits not held by other sub-Jewish *Edot* (ethnicities).

Yet, food holds a much greater role than just symbolizing ethnicity for the community members. Through discussions about cooking Persian cuisine, members of the Persian community signal their unique feature and the separation of Jewish Persians from other Persians. The use of Farsi revealed how members of the community present their ethnic heritage to separate themselves from other ethnicities in the Israeli society and include themselves in the Persian/Iranian one. The use of food, in contrast, allows community members to signal the uniqueness of the Jewish community within the Persian ethnicity worldwide. Again, we see how members distinct themselves through their Persian identity, creating estrangement within a community they also work hard to include themselves in.

In the context of Persian cuisine, many members talk about Gondi dumplings, a specialty dish served on *Shabbat* dinner in Jewish-Persian families' homes. They upload

photos of it, create memes related to it, and share jokes illuminating the importance of this small symbol to the community. Some have even went as far as replacing the symbolic sun and lion of the pre-revolutionary Iranian flag with a photo of a Gondi dumpling (Figure 5). The flag became integral component in offline meetings, where community members proudly flagged it. The flag, that was first introduced online, found its way offline, and then back online through photos and videos of community gathering posted by members of the Facebook group. The example of the Gondi dumpling, but other dishes, baked goods, and holiday cuisine, allow members of the Persian community to become a distinct community both in Israel, Iran, and in the larger Persian diaspora around the world.



Figure 5, Gondi dumpling Iranian flag, reprint from It means you are Persian Facebook group, 2016

Culinary, family customs, religious traditions, music, movies, the calendar, and language, all become cultural forms of both the past and the present, cultural pieces and memories that allow members of the community to re-build their post-migration image. Against negative narratives of migration and assimilation in Israel, members of the Persian community use social media to create a shared sense of belonging. The sphere they create together becomes a home, allowing them to relocate their culture from the privacy of the home, from the living room and the kitchen, to the public eye. Granted, this “public eye” is neither mainstream Israeli media, nor a mainstream discussion of ethnicity in the Israeli society. Yet, it is a sphere that in comparison to the past is integral to community members’ day-to-day lives, and allows the community to become visible to its members on a daily basis.

Both scholarly literature on the subject and participants in this study agree that ethnic identification in the Israeli society was a matter of liminal time and space, on weekends gathering and events, distinct from daily routines. Otherwise, this identity was not acknowledged outside of the privacy of home. I argue that by using Facebook, by sharing songs, and by discussing memories and the Farsi language, members of the Persian community in Israel made ethnicity an every-day practice and perspective. “Before these digital times, most of the ethnic identification was kept inside the privacy of the home,” argues Ronen, the administrator of the language group. According to him, ethnicity was manifested by using the Farsi language with parents, listening to Persian music, practicing Jewish religious rituals with a Persian flavor in the synagogue, but it

was all in the privacy of the members' homes, only with their immediate family. Ronen adds to that:

The rare times in which we took our Persian identity out to the public were in holidays or special days, out of the regular routine of our regular lives. I think it would be accurate to say, and that others will agree with me, that with Facebook, social media, YouTube, and all of those platforms we made it [the Persian identity] a day-to-day thing, something we talk about and practice regularly rather than just in the synagogue, just with our parents in their home, or just on special occasions.

With the embeddedness of online media in our day-to-day lives, the ethnic identification became a matter of routine rather than liminality, bringing the Persian identity back into the lives of the community members. In the Israeli context, with the Israeli melting pot in mind, these findings beg further consideration of the ways in which such acts question Israeli ethnic hierarchies and social structures.

Pushing Back Against a Cultural Melting Pot; Reaffirming Ethnic Hierarchies

As reviewed earlier in this dissertation, the “melting pot” was a prominent declared purpose of the Zionist leadership in Israel as large immigration waves arrived in the 1950s (Ya’ar, 2005). In this context, different theories ask to question the melting pot metaphor, and replace it with references to the different ingredients making the “pot,” that is, the different ethnic groups gathered under a national state. The melting pot

approach focuses on dominant narratives that exemplify the preferred national identity in different contexts. Multicultural theories, in contrast, criticize “cultural harmony that attempt to forge equality and national unity out of diversity” (Gabriel, 2005, n.d.), emphasizing the problematic aspects of flattening social differences and varied cultural backgrounds into an alleged one coherent cultural standard (i.e. national identity). Thus, terms such as “salad bowl” and “cultural mosaic” are used in order to stress social and cultural tolerance and diversity. These theories, while prominent even today, date back to the 1960s and are extremely relevant to any study focused on immigrants’ societies (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). Albite existing criticism, tensions between social structures and particular ethnic forms keep on characterizing social experiences of minority groups even today. Marginalization and misrepresentation are still central themes in many cultural debates acknowledging racial, ethnic, and national clashes in contemporary western societies. In the context of this dissertation, it was found that many of the participants still experience the outcomes of the Israeli melting pot agenda, and work to overcome the cultural and ethnic amnesia fostered by it.

So far, in this chapter, I have highlighted the tensions between the Israeli “melting pot” and the wish for an ethnic identification as they are reflected in participants’ experiences of being Persian in Israel. I now turn to discuss the tension between pushing back against the cultural melting pot and perpetuation of discriminatory social structures within the Israeli society. Based on participant’s stories, I address online environments as spaces for facilitation of discourse that challenges the Israeli melting pot project vis-à-vis preserves social hierarchies and cultural discrimination.

When asked about the motivations for opening the Facebook group, the creator of the “It means you are Persian” points out a larger inclination of ethnic identification online. “A trend of ‘it means you are...’ groups just started on Facebook a few years ago, and everyone in Israel had a group – you know you are Russian/Yemenite/Moroccan/Ethiopian and so on. But we [him and a friend who opened the group together] noticed that there is no group for Persians, so we decided to open one.” The creator of the group is an 18 years old high school pupil, a son of two Iranian immigrants. He opened the group when he was 15, pointing at a larger cultural moment (as he argues) in the Israeli society, in which online media, in contrast to older generations of offline mainstream Israeli media, allow users to formulate and present cultural and ethnic images of themselves, rather than only consuming them. This is not to say that niche media catering to minority groups in Israel did not exist. Nevertheless, we still see a movement towards a self-proclaimed and self-circulated identification that is built by community members in much more “easy to use” platforms. Thus, a discourse that was mostly open to media professionals, politicians, and media companies, is now much more accessible to the individual user and minority groups. As I showed above, circulating self-constructed images, as well as comment on mainstream media texts, extend the ability of the different ethnic Israeli groups to gain a sense of belonging. Moreover, I argue that these spheres and self-built images also enable users to push back against ethnic oppressions.

In this context, Orly, a member of the “It means you are Persian” Facebook group elaborates on the issue in a blog post (Noy, 2013):

The impressive and constant growth of the group's [It means you are Persian] members and the truly astronomical number of posts they publish, speak of an entire generation's need for that safe environment. After years of feeling uncomfortable when our friends laughed at the sight of cucumbers in the fruit-bowls on our living room tables, we can proudly upload gorgeous pictures of those bowls and take pride in them, for they hold pieces of our identity. We need that safe place where we don't need to hide being "*Farsi-Miduni*," but rather where we can be happy and excited to share that with friends who, like us, know how to express anger, happiness, excitement, disappointment, humor, appreciation and friendship in Farsi, creating a brotherhood that only immigrants and their children can comprehend. The group does not define itself as a protest group, and I think that most of the members do not see it as such. Yet, it is hard to ignore the truly subversive dimension it gains from the essence of its role in opposing cultural whitewashing: the Iranian element of these young people's identity is not superfluous, but rather is well known, loved and integral, gaining its legitimacy to the chagrin of the destructive hegemony and its belligerent attempts to erase, mock and ridicule.

The attempts to push back against cultural oppression, pointed out in the quoted blog post, are expressed in variety of ways, related to all cultural forms mentioned above – food, music, language, and so on. In most of these attempts, members use the online sphere to call out cultural appropriations by the

Ashkenazi group, and resent years of oppression. According to this blogger, these are not necessarily conscious acts of protest, but they certainly serve a similar purpose -- pushing back against the Israeli cultural and ethnic homogenizing project.

As part of this attempt, a journalistic piece featured in *Ynet*, the website of the newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, one of the most widely circulated daily newspapers published in Israel, was posted in the group. This piece presented four Persian recipes for the readers to try. Group members point out that the author of the piece (a prestigious Israeli chef, Erez Komarovsky) is Ashkenazi and not a “real” Persian, fearing that within a few decades “Polish women” will announce it is a Polish dish. The reference to Polish women is a Synecdoche, the use of one sub-group of European background to point out the cultural appropriation performed by the larger Ashkenazi group. This case, however, is interesting as it reflects a cultural anxiety of a different kind. If thus far participants shared the hardship of discarding their ethnic identity, here an additional fear surfaces. Participants resent both the cultural flattening of their own identities and cultural appropriation diluting their traditions. Thus, the alleged inclusion of the Persian culture in mainstream media is perceived by the community as appropriation rather than as a sensitive multicultural acknowledgment of the culture.

Another post originally published in *Yedioth Ahronoth* and shared by group members, deals with the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi dichotomy. The article covers the issue of economic inequality in Israel; stating “*Mizrahim* still make lower income.” A group member follows this article with a question: “So, do you think it is better to be born

Ashkenazi?” Group members acknowledged and complained about the stated inequality, yet many of them stated “there is nothing to be jealous about, be proud of who you are,” “we have thousands of years of culture, they [the Ashkenazim] have nothing,” and “the Persians make more money than the Askenazim.” In this example, group members profess an opposition to the established hierarchical structure of the Israeli society. They try to represent themselves in a positive way and to negotiate this Israeli ethnic hierarchy. That is, the image of the Mizrahi group presented in the journalistic article is re-articulated by group members, to formulate a more positive image of the Persian community, which they conceive as part of the larger Mizrahi group in Israel.

In their comments following the post, group members identify themselves as Mizrahi. Through this identification, the Persian community creates a sense of belonging within the Israeli Mizrahi group, but at the same time further creates a sense of estrangement from the larger Israeli society. On the one hand, this identification creates solidarity with a larger disadvantaged group, pushing against years of oppression. Members of the Persian community view themselves as a part of a larger community, forming a sense of belonging. On the other hand, by utilizing an us-versus-them rhetoric, the discussion accentuates the existing social clash or dichotomy. Going back to the movement between belonging and estrangement mentioned earlier in the chapter, these two examples clearly mark an act of criticism that simultaneously positions the Persian community within the Mizrahi group, but at the same time also positions them as antagonists to hegemonic groups in Israel.

Community members' criticism of cultural oppression enacted by European-originated groups and subversive identification as ethnic minorities in Israel can be considered as a postcolonial apparatus. Members are using online media to negate the image formulated for them by hegemonic groups, re-constructing a sense of identity that was previously rejected by them in light of a cultural colonizing practices of the Israeli melting pot. They are now re-living a cultural past that was pushed outside of their day-to-day lives in favor of an alleged harmony between all Jewish-Israeli members in Israel. Thus, they construct a notional space that allows them to build a sense of belonging while re-constructing an identity pushed aside by mainstream discourse.

Yet, these media texts and this identity are not produced or consumed in a void. The Israeli context—that is, the hegemonic structures, assimilating society, and cultural colonization—did not only create a fertile ground for the Persian community members to subvert. This context also provides them with other oppressive cultural structures directed at other minority groups in Israel to consider. Thus, members of the Facebook groups simultaneously re-articulate their place in the Israeli society through positive representations of themselves, but at the same time perpetuate the oppression of other minority groups in Israel. Members of the Persian community position themselves as a part of the Mizrahi group, criticizing oppressive cultural and economic structures within the Israeli society, while concurrently re-creating these same structures, negatively positioning and portraying other groups of Mizrahi Jews.

This oppressive practice is specifically expressed towards Jewish Yemenites. Other ethnic and cultural groups are also criticized (Romanian, Moroccan, and Russians

for example), but the most consistent and direct “onslaught” is expressed in the group is towards Jewish Yemenites, another migrating community living in Israel. In the groups’ posts, videos, memes, photos, and discussions, Yemenites are constantly ridiculed, presented in extremely negative manner, becoming a running joke in group discussions. They are depicted as *schnorrers*, cheap in their way of living, a group with low or no education, unclean people that do not belong within the Israeli society. In one of the posts, a group member asks the rest of the group: “Do you know what the Persians’ favorite food is? – Watermelon. It can be food, a drink... even a bowl and a helmet” ridiculing the long-standing Israeli stigma of the Persian “economic” way of thinking. This post was followed by comments that criticize the writer, and address this quality to the Yemeni group. “This is funny, but it is actually the Yemenites favorite food, not ours” or “why do you mention the Yemenites, it makes me sick” were just two of the references that depict the negative features the group members attribute to another ethnic group in Israel.

Other posts present the same attitudes towards Yemenites. When discussing the richness of the Persian kitchen and cuisine, members contrast the Yemeni way of cooking with it – “there is nothing but flour and water.” Many other videos related to unfortunate accidents (home videos that become viral for example) are instantly associated with Yemenites, ridiculing their inability to perform basic acts such as showering, riding a bicycle, walking, and so on. Examples of unclean, uneducated, backward, unhealthy, subnormal, or plain weird situations are framed as related to that group. More than anything else, through depictions of Yemenites, members of the

Persian community confront the stereotype of stinginess highly associated with the Persian group in Israel.

By shedding the stereotype of being cheap and consistently transferring it to another ethnic group within the Israeli society, members of the community create a space in which they are not stigmatized and where the negative association related to this undesirable social quality is not identified with them. However, by creating this positive space for themselves, group members perpetuate the exact social structures they fight against when it comes to their own image. Group members produce a narrative that at the same time confronts and criticizes the Israeli melting pot and ethnic oppression, but also recreate the exact same oppression towards the Yemenite group.

This finding becomes even more important when situated within the context of the early years of the institutionalized Israeli melting pot. In previous research, I have found that Israeli newspapers, backed by hegemonic political-cultural power, utilized the image of the Jewish Yemenites immigrants to signal undesirable social and cultural traits within the Israeli society (Yadlin-Segal and Meyers, 2015). Through negative depiction and constant comparison to the Palestinian ‘other,’ 1950s Israeli media represented the Yemenite Jew as the ultimate ‘other,’ farthest from the *Sabar* in terms of religion, character, and abilities. Thus, the Yemenite that was portrayed as the symbol of the immigrating other has maintained its status even in media spheres that are not produced by mainstream hegemonic groups in the Israeli society. This shows that the oppressive Israeli context, even if acknowledged and criticized, has deeper influence on the social perception of minority ethnic groups themselves. When situating the subversive

dimensions of the self-identified Persian community within the larger context of ethnic oppression in Israel, we can see that this group utilize similar tools and similar rhetoric to the one used by hegemonic groups.

Online, members of the Persian community share positive representations of their ethnicity. They work to create a sense of belonging and a space they can call a home through sharing and negotiating existing culture in Israel and Iran. However, these discussions and positive depictions are sometimes juxtaposed against, and even at the expense of, other ethnic groups in Israel. Hence, online spheres are only liberating to some extent. Group members were able to share positive representation of the Persian culture and identity, creating favorable self-identification. At the same time, they have preserved the acceptable ethnic understanding of inferiority regarding other ethnic groups within the Israeli society.

Concluding Remarks: Online Environments and Lived Ethnicity

In this chapter, I have focused on the ethnic facet of the Persian identity in Israel. I have showed that members of the community find online environments as a liberating sphere, allowing them to negate and negotiate ethnic colonization and social hierarchies established in the Israeli society. This process of negotiation is formed through different layers of identifications, where members both include and exclude themselves in and from four different circles: the national Jewish community in Israel, the religious Jewish community in Israel, the Mizrahi ethnic metagroup in Israel, and the global Persian

community In Iran and in diaspora, that included Jewish-Iranian global diaspora within it. All of these are addressed through the ethnic perspective, that is, through consideration of the ethnic identity marker as the primary identification factor. It seems that by acknowledging each of these social categories, members of the Persian community create a complex sphere, forming a much-needed inclusion at times, and at times missing that aim.

The ethnic identity formulated through this process is context related, and is in constant change. It is constructed against and within cultural shifts, embedded in processes that cross space and times, articulated in relations to a specific Israeli setting that might not be relevant to other members of the Persian community globally, or even to Jewish Persians elsewhere (Los Angeles for example). In the national context, community members create a discourse that pushes back against historical ethnic oppressions backed by the Zionist movement in Israel. Members formulate positive identification as ethnically Persian by sharing the community's collective memory and unique culture, creating and circulating hybrid Persian media texts, to re-build their identity and sense of belonging via online environments. Here participants move between the wish to push back against the Israeli ethnic melting pot and the wish to form a sense of belonging. Thus, by emphasizing the belonging to an ethnic group, members further accentuate their estrangement within the hegemonic national community and culture in Israel.

This point is important for understanding the changing nature of the Zionist grand narratives of migration, and is re-visited in the next chapter. However, probing

identity formation between ethnicity and nationality is not unique to my study. As Hall (1987) points out, these two sources of identification (nationality and ethnicity) stand in somewhat of a conflict. Hall argues: “some people now... begin to reach for a new conception of ethnicity as a kind of counter to the old discourses of nationalism or national identity” (pp. 45-46). We see in this chapter that indeed, in light of cultural hegemonic oppression, these are articulated as conflicting ends of the Persian community’s cultural belonging. However, as I dig deeper into this conflict in the next chapter, I argue that just positioning the two as conflicting is not thorough enough when discussing the complexity of forming either ethnic or national identity within the Israeli society. Through discussions of essentialism and constructivism, of homelands and migration, and of places and spaces, I extend the conversation between ethnicity and nationality in the following chapter.

In the religious context, community members stress their Persian uniqueness through presenting Jewish-religious practices distinct to the Persian ethnicity. Again, building internal cohesion while estranging themselves, to some extent, from the rest of the Jewish society. Contrary to this, when community members discuss the larger Persian community worldwide, they seem to stress their Jewish identity characteristics, underlining their unique place within the global Persian society. This demonstrates a mix-and-match form of identification that is context and place related, enabled by online environments. Members highlight a favorable identification in different situation to highlight the community’s unique features, while also creating sense of belonging in other groups (national, religious, and global).

Online, users are able to simultaneously draw on multiple sources of identification to construct their identity and community (Rheingold, 1993). As Graham (2004) describes this process in the Jewish European context, users “pick’n’mix” religious practices that fit with their personal and communal definitions of Judaism to make sense of their identity and community. The ability to pick’n’mix pieces of online and offline religious materials stem from an overall postmodern mix and match tendencies (Masso & Abrams, 2015). In the Persian context, we see how users mix-and-match traditions, identity markers, media texts, and community affiliations to create a sense of belonging post-migration. These affiliations, according to Rheingold (1993), might be loose and ephemeral at times, but also meaningful in becoming a community. This process becomes even more important in light of Brasher’s (2001) argument, suggesting that online identity and community construction can make “a unique contribution to global fellowship... lessening potential interreligious hatred” (p. 6) and hopefully also ethnic tensions within the Israeli community as well as diplomatic tensions between Iran and Israel.

The practice of mixing and matching becomes even more evident in the Israeli ethnic setting. In the context of the Mizrahi group, the Persian Israeli community practices a dual act. On the one hand, pushing against cultural whitewashing, members include themselves within the Mizrahi group, preforming solidarity with other migrants from Muslim countries against the Ashkenazi cultural hegemony. On the other hand, members of the community perpetuate hegemonic structures when discussing the image of the Jewish Yemenite community, using it as a scapegoat on which they throw the

stigmatic stereotypes associated with the Persian community in Israel. This, as argued, is consistent with dominant Zionist practices of cultural oppression established over 70 years ago. In this case, we see again the movement between belonging and estrangement, somewhat in, somewhat out of the Mizrahi group.

Based on these findings, I offer conclusions that relate to two main fields. First, I contextualize these findings within the framework of new media studies. Here I show how the Persian case reminds us of the need to study internet usage against a concrete social setting to fully understand the factors shaping identities, communities, and cultures negotiated and constructed online. Second, I discuss conclusions that contribute to the field of ethnic identity studies, particularly in the Israeli context. Drawing on media and religion studies, I attempt at defining the term ‘lived ethnicity’ as an identification process enabled by online media.

Going back to the quote opening this chapter, I focus on the contextualized and localized usage of online media. According to Miller and Slater (2000), “the internet is not a monolithic or placeless ‘cyberspace’; rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations” (p. 1). Based on this notion, they suggest that scholars should address internet-based media as continuous and embedded within other social spaces and relations. Thus, when “members of a specific culture attempt to make themselves a(t) home in a transforming communicative environment” (p. 1), they are not working within a self-enclosed apartness. Online media users might actively change and address their sense of belonging and their perceived identity, yet

they do this in relation to a specific locality characterized by specific social and cultural trends and structures.

In contrast, Castells (1996/2000) argues that the networking logic of internet-based media “induces a social determination of a higher level than that of the specific social interest expressed through the networks: the power of flows takes precedence over the flow of power” (p. 500). Referring to the infrastructure of the internet, Castells prioritizes the global over the local, the structure of the net over the structure of social contexts. While online media and spaces do allow members of the Persian community in Israel to draw on global networks of information and content, much of their identification is, as I argue above, context and place related. Members of the Persian community draw on their ethnic affiliation to build a home and a sense of identity online. This finding points at the importance of places within online media consumption.

While the internet transcends the coupling of time and space as it connects geographically non-contiguous spaces and places, the use of online media is still be grounded in local context, as place-based settings still play an important role in online media production and consumption. Scholars focusing on identity formation online should acknowledge the geographically transcending nature of both the net itself and the content share on it, but still highlight the local characteristics that inform these identity formation processes, as these are not ahistorical or untouched by local circumstances. While the Persian identity formulated in Israel is not unique in this case, it does add another example of the need for a contextualized online media analysis.

Another central conclusion emerging from the findings relates to the nature of ethnic identity in online culture. Participants shared in interviews and online that their ethnic identity became a central issue in their lives after joining the Facebook groups. They have moved it from the privacy of their homes to the open sphere of the internet, as well as from the liminality of holidays and cultural occasions to the routine of day-to-day lives. The language they were hiding, the material memories they brought with them, their religious traditions, and ethnic practices are now publicly performed, shared routinely with the community. Being Persian in Israel, to some extent, became a perspective through which members started creating and interpreting media texts. They did not only share text that directly relates to being Persian, but also decoded non-ethnic texts using the ethnic perspective. At the same time, these same texts became a source for articulating and learning about the Persian identity. Thus, ethnicity both informed and was informed by the Persian community's wish to formulate identity and a sense of belonging in a specific national, religious, and global context.

Similar practices have been conceptualized as "Lived Religion" in the religious context. Lived religion is a dual process in which individuals draw on religious sources to make sense of their world, and the experience of the sacred in everyday practices (Maynard, Moschella Clark & Hummel, 2010; McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2006). It is the ongoing, semiautonomous, and dynamic relations of religion with everyday life, which traditional institutions have very little official hold upon (Orsi, 1997; Hervieu-Leger, 1997). Campbell (2010) argues that we should address lived religion through media usage, as individuals' religion frames and is framed by media consumption and

production. In the same vein, I have shown (Yadlin-Segal, 2015) in the context of internet memes creation and circulation, that new media as a whole, and the internet in particular, provide their users with content to reformat and transmit utilizing their own personal perspective based on their own identity. Through media texts, consumed and produced by internet users, individuals both learn about and articulate their identity.

Focusing on the complex relationship between nationality and ethnicity, Clark (2005) shows how material remains and historic documents reflect the “lived” aspects of identity construction processes. Through an archaeological investigation of Hispanic ethnicity in the United States, Clark emphasizes the need to look at practices that might come across as mundane and esoteric, such as food and cuisine preparation or trash disposal patterns, to understand larger colonizing practices. While Clark’s goal was not “to engage in arguments about whether or not subalterns can speak” (p. 449), my goal is exactly that. Thus, I borrow Clark’s focus on the “lived” ethnic experience to learn of the ways online media play in the creation of “lived ethnicity” for the Persian community, a marginalized group in the Israeli context.

To do that, I couple the term lived religion with the concept “ethnicity in motion.” Moreno (2015) has addressed ethnic identities as changing and context dependent, as shifted and negotiated against the background of specific places in specific times, leading him to discuss “ethnicity in motion.” Conducting a comparative analysis of Jewish-Moroccan ethnic identity formation through offline social networks in Israel and Venezuela, Moreno argues:

Rather than asking, in a variety of ways, who chose aliyah [in Hebrew, migration to Israel] over other sorts of migration, or who maintained ethnicity after migration in reaction to political change, a new analytical concept [ethnicity in motion] took us into the realms of how, when and where those experiences took shape. The question how may enable us to trace practices of ethnicity formation among Jews, both migrants and potential migrants, who influenced each other throughout the course of historical change. The questions when and where may lead to an exploration of ethnicity as embedded in unique places and moments. Together, the two questions promote a diachronic view of cultural shifts, embedded in people's changing identities over time, as they moved across space and time, from one social context to another, throughout their lives (p. 307).

When participants in this study attest that they are not only learning about their identity online, but also utilizing this identity to decode media messages, to decide what to share online, and to articulate who they are through group discussions, they exemplify the lived aspects of this ethnic identity. However, this identity is not only lived because it becomes a central locus of interest and interpretation in participants' lives. It is lived because, as Moreno argued, it is shifting, and negotiated, and dependent upon migrating to a specific context in a specific time. The process of building a sense of belonging as Persians in Israel requires the movement between the local and the global, as well as

within different local circles. Thus, the identity receives its essence from the circumstances in which it is being formulated.

Through the process of constructing an ethnic identity, members of the Persian community express the influence of time – being able to push back against hegemonic constructions established many years ago – yet working within specific cultural pressures, ones that drive them to formulate this identity against and within existing social orders. That is why the Yemenite community in Israel, for example, becomes relevant to the process of construction. In the same vein, this is why an Israeli Oscar winning Farsi-speaking movie that depicts a Persian family's life in Israel receives a large echo by members online. This lived ethnic identity, which originated in the physical movement of the migrating community, keeps on changing and evolving, feeding and being fed by users online. Looking at practices of “lived ethnicity” within different minority groups can allow us a comparative perspective, discussing similarities and differences within specific societies in different times, or between different societies at the same time.

The two main conclusions I suggest are focused on identity and online media usage as contextualized phenomena that must be studied and situated against social structures and cultural understanding. This, in turn, might shed light not only on the specific use and on the specific studied identity, but also on the unique situation that enables them. The context I am focused on to develop this analysis is national. However, investigating religious, economic, gendered, generational, and other identity markers might benefit the understanding of lived ethnicities formulated via online environments.

CHAPTER V

**NARRATIVES OF NATIONALITY AND PATRIOTISM: CONSTRUCTING A
CULTURAL IDENTITY, BUILDING A DUAL HOMELAND**

“But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or “sub-oppressors.” The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of “adhesion” to the oppressor. Under these circumstances they cannot “consider” him sufficiently clearly to objectivize him — to discover him “outside” themselves. This does not necessarily mean that the oppressed are unaware that they are downtrodden. But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 45).

The previous chapter of this dissertation focused on contextualizing the Persian identity in the Israeli context. I have discussed the ways in which members of the Persian community construct their ethnic identity and sense of belonging, re-creating a home that was somewhat lost in the process of migration to and assimilation in Israel. In this chapter, I move to study how this sense of home is articulated within the national context, adding the sense of a homeland to the familial sense of a home. Here I focus on

the construction of a Jewish national identity by members of the Persian community as it relates to the Persian ethnic identity. To do so, I highlight the complex relationship between nationality and ethnicity, showing that while members of the Persian community work to formulate a space that includes and respects their ethnic identification, they also include some mainstream notions of Jewish nationality in it. I endeavor to theorize this coupling of conflicting narratives (i.e. resistance and embracement) through coining the term “affirmative opposition,” describing how members of the Persian community reaffirm existing social structures within the Israeli society through acts of opposition.

This line of thought follows extensive academic work on the relationship between ethnicity, nationality, and culture. I argue that while it is often seemed, specifically in the Israeli case, that dominant national voices oppress ethnic identification, ethnic identification can, but does not have to, work against these oppressions. As Braman (2006/2009) points out, “Though the nation has long been bureaucratized by the state, the political power of national cultural identity became a locus of political agitation... national identity today continues to provide a powerful and effective organizational lure that... has widely replaced class identity (p.32).” I use the case of the Persian community in Israel to understand how ethnic minorities negotiate and address this national lure, building a cultural space that integrates the ethnic and the national.

The chapter opens with a discussion of the current diplomatic relations between Israel and Iran as members of the Persian community in Israel experience them. I then

turn to discuss the ways in which community members build their belonging to Iran and Israel, drawing on essentialist and constructivist approaches to the study of nationality. Following this, I discuss the importance of online media for virtually visiting Iran, a central component helping community members to identify as Iranians. The next section of the chapter analyzes the articulation of the Persian place in the Israeli civil religion by focusing on Holocaust commemoration. The chapter concludes with a discussion of online media as a third space that facilitates affirmative opposition.

A Dual Homeland between Iran and Israel

In the previous chapter, I have shown how participants re-create a sense of community and belonging through Persian-centered online media. By discussing their background, shared experiences, nostalgia, and sense of longing, members of the Persian community in Israel are able to re-connect to identity markers that were relatively oppressed for many years. I have shown how a post-migration community gains a sense of home away from home, in the midst of a diplomatic crisis between their homeland and host land. Moving the discussion to the national layer of identification, I highlight in the following sections members' understanding of their place within and between what they address as two homelands. That is, through analysis of interviews, observations, and posts shared online, I show that participants question the Zionist narrative of Israel being the only homeland of worldwide Jewry, placing themselves as part of two national groups.

Migration and Israel Iran Relations

To engage the process of constructing a dual belonging to Iran and Israel, we first need to understand the current diplomatic relations between Iran and Israel as participants in this study describe them. This topic came up often when I asked about the use of different online media to maintain communication with family members and friends still living in Iran. Anna, the administrator of one of the Facebook groups explains: “We communicate according to people’s different degree of fear using Viber, Facebook, cell phone, each in his own way. We also communicate by land-line phone and email, again, if you are not afraid to use it.” Anna stresses that on both sides – Israel and Iran – there is a fear to expose communication with family and friends.

“Most of the media I mentioned are used illegally in Iran,” Anna adds. “Take Facebook, for example, it has filters on it in Iran, everything is blocked. They [family members and friends] install anti-filters and create online aliases, because they are afraid and prefer not to have direct contact with anyone from Israel. But, in terms of technology, Iranians are not behind us.” By pointing out the technological abilities of citizens in Iran, Anna differentiates between the government that leads a partial religious withdrawal from media technologies and internet use, and citizens, who are savvy users of internet-based media. To stress that Anna adds: “They introduced me to mobile applications such as Viber and WhatsApp, they taught me how to use Skype, and communication is regular and frequent. Yes, we often use codes and hints in case we are surveilled, but there is constant communication.”

The extensive reliance on media to maintain these connections stems, according to participants, from the lack of possibilities to travel between the two states. Participants share that up until 5-6 years ago, Iranians were visiting Israel and Israelis were visiting Iran. Anna explains the manner in which traveling between the two states worked:

They [visitors from Iran] would travel through Turkey, and get the visa for Israel only once in Turkey. The same worked for the Israeli side. The Iranian leadership is not stupid; they know all of these people are not really in Turkey. But, it does not really matter if you were actually visiting Israel or not. If they want to catch you and punish you, they will do so regardless of what really happened. On the Israeli side, visitors would say that they are Iranians who want to go on a trip to follow their roots and usually the Iranian embassy will be okay with that. Or at least – they used to be okay with that. Israelis traveling to Iran actually ran into problems on the Israeli side and not on the Iranian side. When they returned to Israel, custom security used to interrogate them about their visit, what they did in Iran, who they were in touch with, what they brought with them, and so on. They would give them real hard time coming back to Israel. Those who have nothing to hide can prove it and then there are no problems. When arriving to Turkey, Jewish Iranians used to go to the Israeli embassy in Turkey, then a representative from the embassy called us [family members in Israel] to ask if we know the people who ask to enter Israel – since they are Jewish they can enter Israel fairly easily, or at least, they

used to. The embassy just wants to make sure that they have family relatives in Israel, and once they affirmed that, visitors got a temporary travel visa to Israel... I used to get regular calls from the Israeli ambassador in Turkey, asking me if I know this or that person who gave my name and phone number as a contact person. That was usually my uncle, my mother's brother, and I would always say absolutely, he is coming to visit. There used to be no problem with these visits.

This, however, is no longer the case. "Since Ahmadinejad, things have changed a lot," Anna shares. "This line [of traveling between Iran and Israel] was completely shut down, and there is not actual physical visitors' movement between the two states." Anna's Iranian family members used to visit Israel every summer, but that has changed since the Ahmadinejad era. "Now we are all afraid. The last time I met my family from Iran we all had to travel to Turkey because they were afraid to enter Israel, and we just cannot enter Iran. It used to be an open line of transit even after the revolution, now everyone is too afraid and we do not travel between the states."

Anna's understanding of the diplomatic relations is not surprising. It is well known and established that the current diplomatic Israel-Iran relations are heated. The conflict between the states emerged after the Iranian revolution of 1979. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Republic, made anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism central to Iran's Islamic ideology (Litvak, 2006). The possible nuclear abilities Iran holds, as well as the close political and military ties with Hizballah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas also intensified this conflict (Hendel, 2012). Iran's sixth president, Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad, added Holocaust denial as another aspect of this conflict (Ahouie, 2009). The memory of the Holocaust became a central interpretive framework of contemporary relations between Iran and Israel.

On the Iranian side, Ahmadinejad linked what he viewed as the memory of the “alleged” Holocaust with a call for Israel’s citizens to relocate to Europe, strongly connecting the building of the Israeli state with the occurrence of the Holocaust. On the Israeli side, Prime Minister Netanyahu utilized a narrative that equates Iran with Nazi Germany in multiple situations. I have showed in another study (Yadlin-Segal, forthcoming) that the Holocaust is constantly used in Israel as a cultural and political point of reference to post-revolutionary Iran in popular culture. Other writers looking at Israeli news sources also pointed out the use of such references (Ben-Zaken, 2013). These social narratives of a conflict and the inability to physically visit Iran, lead members of the Persian community to use other means for establishing their connection and belonging to the Iranian community, while maintaining a sense of belonging in the Israeli society.

Participants have shared a sense of duality in term of belonging while conversing about their national identification. In online discussions and interviews, they signal the dual belonging to two national communities – the Jewish Israeli one and the Iranian one. The interesting aspect is that these two national groups are, to some extent, imagined and idealized rather than concrete. By means of invention, members construct several narratives that allow a dual belonging to two conflicting societies, both not completely faithful to the dominant narratives of either society. On the Iranian side, members

reminisce and construct a sense of a homeland that draws heavily on pre-revolutionary notions of national identity. These relate to the Pahlavi monarchy and members' own personal life pre-migration. The strong emphasis on ethnic identity markers, as shown in the prior chapter, complements this idea. However, as part of this national identification members also remember persecution and hatred towards the Jewish community in Iran. On the Israeli side, members continue to push back against dominant narratives of national belongings, but at times also utilize these same narratives to imagine an ideal and desirable position of the Persian community in the Israeli society.

Building a Homeland through National Belonging

The imagined belonging presented above couples Iran and Israel as the homelands of the Persian community in Israel. Most participants do not challenge the notion of being Israelis or belonging to the Jewish national community. Rather, they creatively find ways to acknowledge this belonging while also building a strong connection to Iran. Shelly points at this narrative in an interview, explaining why Persian Facebook groups became attractive for members of the community: “We become one family, and realize that most of us grew up, laughed, cried, and got educated at the same home—only the address was different. Thirsty for more and more posts, we sit in front of a computer screen day and night and reminisce, sharing beloved songs, photos, and experiences... fantasizing about Terminal 3 Flight 007, all wearing white T-shirts holding a double-sided flag—Iran-Israel –waiting for our trip to our ancestral homeland.”

When writing about this topic in one of the Facebook groups, Shelly received warm reactions from other members. “In my dreams, we are all in the airport, wearing a T-shirt with the logo “It means you are Persian.” Our large group is in terminal no. 3, waiting for the next flight to Teheran. The speaker goes off, an announcement is heard: ‘flight 222 to Teheran is now boarding, passengers are welcome to arrive to the gate.’” The excitement of even thinking about traveling to Iran is big. Members share their longing to their homeland, even though some of them were in fact born in Israel.

A member commented on Shelly’s post: “This post perfectly captures our feelings and longing to our past and all that we have unwillingly left behind. And to think that out of all places, only the gates of Iran are closed for us is so disheartening... Here is for hoping that one day these gates will open up, and we will be able to be there once again.” In posts like this one, members highlight the unique case of the Persian community, a group of migrants that is unable to even visit Iran. “This is a great idea” points out one of the other members, “but just so you’ll know, I arrived at Israel over 30 years ago for a two-week vacation, and until today I cannot go back. But please, sign me in, and put me at the top of the list.” This member also mentioned that she came to visit Israel after the revolution, leaving many friends behind with no chance to say goodbye. “I watch videos on YouTube to somehow go back to Iran’s beautiful views and gorgeous cities... dreaming that a day would come and I can visit and complete a full circle... I still hold on to the flight ticket back.”

June, an active member of the two studied Facebook groups, shared a similar story in one of our conversations:

I arrived at Israel in the summer of 1980 to visit my family. It was right after the revolution, we planned to stay for a month and go back home.

However, while I was in Israel, the Iran-Iraq war started, and my parents were not able to bring me back to Iran.

June stayed in Israel, with the one suitcase of clothing she brought with her for a month, and never visited Iran ever since. Going back to Iran, according to her, was not an option. With no intentions to migrate, she found herself living out of her homeland for over 35 years now.

The rest of my brothers and sisters joined us [her and her father] in Israel eventually, but during the time I was in Israel and could not go back to Iran, my mother passed away, and I never got to see her again. We could not immigrate to Israel easily back then. After the revolution, the authorities in Iran did not want us to leave, and we could not justify selling all of our possessions and property in any other way, so it was complicated. We were wealthy, and my father had a hard time just giving it all up and moving away with nothing. So actually, for me, staying in Israel, or migrating to Israel, was never a choice. I still have my passport ready for when I can go back, even if just for a visit.

A short period after realizing she could not go back home, June started acclimating in Israel. She received support from different Jewish agencies in Israel, alongside some help from family members already living in Israel. Yet, through her interviews for this research, and in many of her Facebook posts, June expresses the

difficulties of missing home and building a new one in Israel. In this context, participants share the feeling of being in a state of limbo. Such portrayals highlight migration to Israel as a lack of choice (running away from Iran due to fear of anti-Semitism or due to the revolution) rather than an ideological choice. These posts exemplify how migrants negate the mainstream Zionist narrative of the Jewish homeland. While living in Israel, members of the Persian community share their personal experience of formulating a dual belonging. For some of them, this belonging was not chosen, but rather forced. For others, migrating to Israel was an ideological journey, yet the Iranian identification remained central.

Nowadays, June sees herself first and foremost as an Israeli. Her emotional connection to Iran as her homeland does not overshadow her national belonging to Israel. Similarly, other members of the Persian community felt a need to protect their ethnic identity, as a reaction to cultural oppression. On the national level of identification, we find a different approach. Members work to create a space in which they can be both Jewish-Israelis and Iranian-Persians. Living in Israel, and being unable to visit Iran, the use of online media to maintain communication and connection becomes necessary.

Online Journeys to Iran and Back

Visiting the homeland, that is, traveling to Iran, becomes a virtual endeavor for the members of the Persian community. Helland (2007) points at this process, analyzing

online usage of diaspora communities in religious contexts. According to Helland, “Within a number of diaspora traditions, the Internet and Web are being used by people not just to travel in virtual reality to sacred sites, but also to connect tangibly with their sacred homeland (p. 970).” In light of the Jewish narrative deeming Israel as the homeland of worldwide Jewry, internet-based media became a religious tool for visiting and staying connected with the religious homeland. The Israeli-Persian case becomes interesting considering Helland’s argument. In the Persian context, members of the Jewish community living in Israel use the internet in similar ways, to visit what they view as their homeland. The narrative of Israel being their homeland is coupled with the view of Iran as their homeland. While in Israel, the Persian community flips the migration narrative of the Jewish people returning to the homeland. To some extent, they construct their position as the position of a diaspora community longing to connect with a homeland. Members transform from being Jewish diaspora in Iran to being Persian diaspora in Israel.

This is seen through posts and discussions in the Facebook groups. Members share videos and photos of different locations in Iran. They combine photos from family albums and childhood trips with YouTube videos and images found in other websites, Facebook groups, blogs, and the like. The mix of images and videos let members stroll down their childhood neighborhoods, high schools, or favorite parks. It brings contemporary Iran and past Iran into conversation, allowing members to visit their homeland through online platforms. Helland (2007) reminds us of the limitations of this virtual traveling. “In many ways, this form of online activity lacks a tangible connection

between the avatar, or the virtual traveler, and the real-world site” (p. 968). While this is true, the lack of ability to physically visit Iran is a given in the case of the Persian community in Israel, and their only way to visit these venues is through online media. However, not being physically present in the places documented in shared images and videos does not mean that members feel less of an emotional connection.

June shared this sense of connection in one of our interviews as well as in multiple Facebook posts. Through one of the Facebook groups she follows, June developed an online friendship with a user that currently lives in Iran. While that person is not originally from Iran, he currently lives in Teheran. After a long period of conversations, June found the courage to ask her online friend to look for her childhood home in Teheran and send her photos of it. The friend responded positively and sent June photos of her childhood home. “The house looks exactly the same” June shared when telling me about this interaction. “More than 30 years after I left, I was suddenly washed with nostalgia. I could smell the scent of my home, feel as if I am back there, just by looking at the photo.” While the physical visiting is prohibited, the sensual memories are very much alive in the bodies of the community members. Other members mention specific smells of family dinners, specific noises of their childhood neighborhood, the breeze next to the sea, and other physical experiences that can now be provoked by online media.

Anna expands this narrative by imagining a visit to Iran:

It is a dream to go back to Iran, returning to all of my secret childhood spots. I truly miss Iran, certain scenery, the streets I

grew up in, it is all engraved in who I am. In northern Iran there are resorts we used to visit, I would love seeing them again, go to the Caspian Sea, back to the spectacular views around it... I am sure many of these places have changed, Iran today is not the same place, but just thinking about Isfahan, the bazaar in it, where my father used to buy bronze antiques, the sounds, the smells, I will be on the first plain back to these... This is 70% nostalgia and 30% curiosity to see what happened, all the changes Iran went through since I left. Yes, the memories and the wish to be in Iran tie to my grandmother's house, to the curiosity about the school I went to. I have friends there, family members that stayed in Iran, people I really miss and want to see. I know it is not the place I have left, but so much of me still exist there.

The narrative built by users is that visiting Iran, even if not in person, is still meaningful for them. The ability to reminisce is one thing, but the ability to visit the places members did not see for decades is a profound experience. These sensations are inscribed into their sensory memories and the online experience evokes and intensifies them. While it is “only” through online spaces that they get to experience a sense of belonging to an idealized home, the physical memories come alive through them. Through non-corporal journeying, members position Iran as their homeland, in contrast with the mainstream Israeli-Zionist narrative of the “true” homeland.

Essentialism and Construction in the Persian Identity

Participants build a narrative that positions Iran as their homeland, and their life in Israel, to some extent, as a forced waiting period away from it. The sense of “returning” to a homeland is somewhat overlooked in these stories, and the anticipation to go back to Iran, even if just for a visit, is well declared. At the same time, participants reiterate the notion of Israel being their homeland and safe heaven, allowing many of them to escape persecution in Iran. I asked about this notion of limbo in interviews, trying to further understand how the community works to settle the sense of duality and clash between Israel and Iran. “Iran is my homeland. It is where I was born,” says Rani, a radio producer and broadcaster, explaining his cultural work within the Persian community. In seeking a way to explain the complex flow of culture and people between Israel and Iran, Rani first establishes the sense of commitment to both:

Israel is also a homeland. I see Iran as my mother and Israel as my father.

Sometimes mom and dad get a divorce, it does not mean that their children stop loving them, right? Maybe, the kids can actually make mom and dad make-up. What I am trying to say is, just as I have two eyes, a left one and a right one, I have two homelands.

Rani’s experience of belonging and nationality is equated to the functioning of body organs. He also explains the belonging to the two nations as the belongings of family members to a familial unit. This approach tends towards an essentialist sense of nationality, as a force of nature or history, as an inevitability. The belonging to a national

community is deemed a biological fact, that is, you are born into a nation, and intrinsically belong to it. In the scholarly literature, such primordial approach to nationality portrays the rise of national identity as an organic process. The term 'nation' finds its origins in the Latin word *nasci*, which means "to be born" (Heywood, 2000, p. 251), and therefore advocates of this line of thought argue that national identification is mostly derived from past symbols and shared ethnicity. Members of the Persian community build their identity and sense of belonging drawing on essentialist reasoning. This is done in spaces of contention, between nation states and within each of them, where multiple layers of identification are at play. At the same time, it appears that members instrumentally use these essentialist-ethnic markers to take part in a highly constructivist process. In it, they merge their national identity of origin with identity markers of their post-migration national society, creating a dual homeland.

The matter of being born into a community, or as members view it, a family, is only one of those essential approaches. As shown before, some participants deem the national identity as growing roots that were cut-off with migration. Other members refer to the human body to symbolize the national belonging. A member shared a song by Arash Atila, a known Persian Singer, in one of the Facebook groups. The member added Hebrew and English translation to the post, so that members who only speak Hebrew, or hold a partial command of Farsi can also understand the lyrics. The song details the shared longing for pre-revolutionary Iran – "Iran my homeland. This home is nice but its [sic] not my home. This land is beautiful but its [sic] not my land. That girl with blue eyes and blond hair is not like my amazing love with black eyes." Just like Rani's

comparison of the two homelands to two eyes, this member uses the symbol of the eyes to explain Iranian nationality as an inherent feature. The blue eyes represent the host lands to which many of the Iranian diaspora members immigrated. These eyes are not the eyes of who participants view as the “Iranian native,” or the alleged inherent features associated with the Middle Eastern Iranian look, as members articulate them. Here I do not assume that these essentialist features actually exist, but rather, that members articulate their national belonging through essentialist markers such as nativity, eye color, and the like.

I found these themes in personal online discussions with members of the community as well. By interviewing Joseph, I learned that the sense of Iran being a homeland goes beyond the identification of migrants themselves. Joseph is a middle-class Jewish-Israeli man in his late 20s, member of multiple Persian and Iranian Facebook groups. He is an avid consumer of online Farsi media, and always seeks for ways to be more immersed in the culture. “I was born in Israel, but my homeland is Iran,” he argues. I am a Persian and an Iranian. This is where my family is from and this is where my heart is,” Joseph asserts. Many times, Joseph ties his identity to historical narratives, legitimizing his perspective on being an Israeli-Iranian Jewish Persian. “The Iranian Shah himself said we are family because Esther [discussed earlier in the dissertation] was Jewish and she is his ancestral mother. Jewish communities have a very long history in Iran” Joseph argues, highlighting the ancestral nature of his identity.

In one of our personal online conversations, Joseph shared an image that reiterate the theme of the eyes (Figure 6). However, unlike the abovementioned use of the eyes as an essential aspect of one's national identity, Joseph points at the place of change and construction within the national community. Joseph has never been to Iran. He did not immigrate to Israel, and never held an Iranian nationality. Still, he feels as an Iranian based on his ethnic heritage. He is an Israeli Jewish person that chooses to prioritize his ethnic belonging and borrowed nationality over his physical place of birth. And yet, the two national belongings are not conflicting in Joseph's narrative. Neither do the national and ethnic belongings. Joseph, and many members like him, seeks to bring the two nations into conversation rather than into a conflict.



Figure 6, Israeli and Iranian flags, shared by Joseph via Facebook chat, 2015

In a similar way, members use and create hybrid ethnic media texts drawing on national text to assert and represent what they see as a dual belonging. The fact the Joseph

did not immigrate to Israel led me to assume that there is a difference between the ways immigrants in the community and non-immigrants approach the duality of the homeland belonging. As I show through examples in this chapter and in the following chapter, this assumption was in fact disproved. Members of the community, both those born in Israel and those born in Iran, work together to create this dual shared homeland.

Juxtaposing the two national flags as a representation of one's identity and belonging became a central practice in offline group meetings, as well as in fixed locations such as the Persian radio stations.



Figure 7, Taken by author during participant observation, Radio Ran, broadcasters Rani Amrani and Shahnaz Tehrani, 2015



Figure 8, Taken by author during participant observation, Radio Asal, Farah Peri, 2015

As shown in the Figure 7 and Figure 8, members of the Farsi radio stations in Israel portray the community's identity through national, ethnic, and religious symbols. The design of the studio becomes important since the shows broadcasted online offer the audience a live video stream of the radio station. The visuals, alongside the verbal portion, are shared with the community. In figure 8, we see the pre-revolutionary Iranian flag as it is positioned next to a "*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*" sign (In English: listen people of Israel: the lord is our God, the lord is one). "*Shema Yisrael*" refers to the religious commandment of daily Jewish prayers. Drawing on religious sources for national Jewish identification is not new or unique to the case of this community. In fact, this has been an established practice of the Zionist movement, in which contemporary reading was applied to ancient religious symbols of Judaism (Dahan & Wasserman, 2006).

In figure 7, the Israeli national flag is positioned next to a version of the post-revolutionary Iranian flag, containing the *Faravahar* icon. The *Faravahar* is a religious-cultural symbol of the Zoroastrianism, adopted by the Pahlavi reign to represent the Iranian nation. This symbol, while still used today in Iran, is considered more secular and ethnic rather than Muslim. By bringing the symbols of the two nations together, members create a sense of harmony rather than conflict. However, this harmony is often constructed with pre-revolutionary notions of the republic rather than with current Iranian society or leadership. The memory of the pre-revolutionary past is a highly dominant point of reference, and most of the identity markers presented by members go back to these times rather than to contemporary Iran. Thus, the process of creating a dual sense of homeland, or a dual belonging to the two nations, is a highly imagined one.

This national duality is portrayed in another image (Figure 9) Joseph shared with me in a personal online conversation:



Figure 9, Israeli and Iranian flags with a Star of David, shared by Joseph via Facebook chat, 2015

In the image, the Israeli and post-revolutionary Iranian flags are positioned above a Star of David, a pronounced Jewish symbol. The written text states “*Shabbat Shalom*” in Hebrew (in English: Good, or Peaceful Sabbath), while the diacritics added to the Hebrew letters are taken from the respective letters of the Farsi language. The two images point at the blend of the two cultures and identity markers rather than a separation.

What is even more interesting in the case of the image Joseph shared with me is the extent to which the ethnic and the national are intermingled in the Israeli and in the Iranian case. The symbolism on the pre-revolutionary Iranian flag draws on ethnic Persian heritage, and the Israeli flag draws on the Jewish ethnic-religious history. Positioning the two flags together fuses multiple layers of identification into one cultural identity. This identity transcends each of the

cultures on its own, and creates a new space for the Persian identity in Israel.

Alongside the flags, the use of the two languages is also highly important for the understanding of this hybrid identity.

Language and the Building of a Dual Homeland

In the research field of nationality, spoken and written languages are highlighted as primary instruments of identity construction. Language plays a dual role - it serves as a symbol that reflects the belonging and strength of a society, but at the same time, it is the tool that produces the same unity (Golden, 2001). With the national awakening in the 19th century, European countries pushed towards adopting singular national languages, pushing out local sub-dialects that harmed, in their view, the unity of the nation. Eliav-Feldon (2000) argues that forcing out local dialects and encouraging the use of national languages created a sense of social belonging to the nation state, setting the first European boundaries of national community as early as the 15th century. The significant role of language plays in establishing a national community stands out in the case of the Jewish national awakening. In the 19th century, the Jewish diaspora did not hold a territory or a concrete shared history, living in a host of locations worldwide. The Hebrew language was one of the few common characteristics the Jewish diaspora community held, and thus it turned into one of the driving forces of the Jewish nationality (Safran, 2005).

The shared Jewish language contributed to creating the narrative of the “new Jew.” The Jewish leadership in Israel supported the abandoning of diaspora languages brought to Israel with the immigrating communities. Living as diaspora, these communities, as well as the languages they brought to Israel with them, marked the passive dwelling in exile. Leaving these languages behind while making the spoken Hebrew language the official Israeli language marked the new, active and independent features of the Jewish community in Israel (Amira, 2009). The linguistic dimension did not lose its centrality after the establishment of Israel, where teaching the Hebrew language to immigrants was considered a prime aspect of the cultural assimilation. This was particularly evident in the name given to the primary educational language institution for immigrants—“*Ulpán*”—(can be translated as “studio”) derived from the Hebrew linguistic root of taming (Golden, 2002). Hence, the Hebrew language, alongside its day-to-day functionality in the Israeli context, has an additional strong nationalistic weight.

The Farsi language holds similar significance in the Persian culture and Iranian nationality. Reza Khan (1925-1941) aimed at re-build Iran’s nationality drawing on ethnic pre-Islamic heritage. As the Shah of Iran, he stressed the importance of purifying the Farsi language and its ancient roots in the region. Focused on the building of a united nation, Reza Khan established the Farhangestan (academy of Farsi language and literature) in the early 1930s pushing back against Arabic and French influences in the state. Similarly to the

Israeli case, the ethnic origin of the Farsi language and its usage in the national context became a source of pride and esteem. By bringing the two languages, Hebrew and Farsi, together participants simultaneously subvert the importance of the language, opening them to a cross-cultural discussion instead of separation. At the same time, the two languages become a tool for participants, allowing them to mark their identification with the two ethnic heritages, nations, and cultures. This finding takes us back to one of the main themes in the last chapter – the Farsi language. Proficiency in the Farsi language might become a stamp of approval over one's genuine Persian identity. However, the cross-lingual use of Farsi and Hebrew becomes a way to represent the national duality and inclusion rather than an ethnic pushback.

However, it is important to discuss additional perspectives presented by participants alongside the great longing to their homeland. Members share memories of Iran as a place of persecution, fear, and anti-Semitism. Members' remember how aggressive physical and verbal behaviors towards their parents became a key moment in the decision to immigrate to Israel. Others stress how only by immigrating to Israel they stopped feeling persecuted. One of the more active group members, who is also a radio broadcaster in one of the Persian radio stations, shared her story of oppression. As a young girl in Tehran, she and her siblings attended a secular school. Around the time of the revolution, the Muslim school principal asked pupils in his classroom to condemn Judaism and Israel in their morning prayers. Jewish pupils in the class were asked to ignore their religiosity, and support the principal's perspective. The group member

recollects how she and her friends did not comply. When she tried to stand up against the principle, she slapped the young girl and threw her at the floor. The group member tells in her post on Facebook:

I do not know where I got the strength, but I did not cry. I got up, and the principal said that she hopes some sense got into my head through that experience. She ordered me to go back and do what I was ordered to do [condemning Israel and Judaism] or else she will call the authorities and my verdict as a Zionist will be doomed to death... My parents bagged me to apologize and to do what the principle asked me to do, but I refused and was expelled from school. I had to live in hiding for a short period while my parents arranged a way for me to leave Iran. My father bribed the right people so I can be smuggled out of Iran... When I landed in Israel I kissed the holy land and cried.”

This story and many similar to it that were shared by participants online, reveal a complex attitude towards Iran, but towards Israel as well. On the one hand, Iran is portrayed as the homeland of the Persian community. Even the member who shared the story about the abusive school principle works hard to create bridges between Iran and Israel, a narrative I turn to study in the next chapter. On the other hand, as shown in the last quote, participants often go back to the Zionist narrative that positions Israel as the homeland and the safe haven of persecuted Jewish people worldwide.

The two conflicting narratives position both Iran and Israel as the homelands of the Persian community. In some cases, Iran is the homeland to which participants want

to go back, but cannot. Therefore, Israel becomes the host land in which they reminisce together. In other cases, Iran was a host land, in which persecution based on religious affiliation is experienced, leading participants to migrate to Israel, their national safe heaven as Jewish people. The distinction between these two concepts is blurred. As I have argued in the literature review section, the case of Jewish migration to Israel begs a special attention to the notion of a homeland. Jewish people outside of Israel are deemed in the Zionist narrative a part of the Jewish diaspora, living in a host land. Yet, the experience of migrants “returning” home (to Israel) attests differently. Migrants and their families stress that homelands and host lands are not static in definition and perception. They provide a somewhat different view on what constitutes a homeland in the Jewish thought. These narratives are revealed in interviews and posts shared by participants online.

Moreover, the reality of the conflict between the two nations is experienced with contemporary Iran and its leadership. “You have to understand, there are good people there [in Iran]” argues Rani. “Yes, there are extremists, there is and was Anti-Semitism. But, that is just a small percentage of the population.” By pointing at the continuity of extremist thought in Iran, Ori addresses the fact that members of the community need to make sense of who they are between Iran and Israel today, but also within each state’s history. Thus, we can imagine the movement of identities, as articulated by participants, is on a quadrant system that requires diachronic and geographic considerations. Tensions are experienced between Iran and Israel on the political-geographic axis, but the

task of building a sense of identity moves between past and present of each nation on a diachronic axis. This multi-leveled negotiation is experienced in the Israeli society as well. This is important to understand since the community, while highly connected to Iran, actually lives in Israel.

So far, I have discussed the different ways members negotiate and establish a national belonging to Iran. In the following section, I move to analyzing the ways such belonging is constructed in Israel. Since the memory of the Holocaust became an important issue within Israel-Iran relations I have decided to use it as a locus for understanding the efforts of the Persian community to become an integral part of the Jewish national community in Israel. In the following section I expand this discussion to further exemplify the construction of the dual homeland belonging.

Partaking in a National Discourse – Articulating the Persian Place in the Israeli Civil Religion

A central concept in the study of Jewish nationality in Israel is that of the Civil Religion. Bellah (1967) defined the contemporary meaning of the term to explain the universal and transcendent religious reality of the nation state. Drawing on Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, Bellah used the term to highlight the religious components that exist in the national context –“God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance” (p. 5)—as means of nation building. The

term puts forward the communalities between the state—in general a non-religious apparatus—and religion itself. Thus, as Don-Yihya (1980) explains:

The common between “traditional” and “civil” religion is the sacred dimension, expressed as a sense of awe and commitment to the sacred objects. These two types of religion also ask to mold the character and give meaning to the existence of the individual and society, and fulfill the roles of unity, legitimacy, and political mobilization for its social and political systems. The difference between the two is that... civil religion does not necessarily need an empirical entity as a source of absolute validity and sanctity of values and patterns of behavior (n.d.).

It is important to open the discussion on civil religion with a clarification about the Israeli context. With the establishment of the state, the Zionist movement asked to construct a secular society that was clearly distinguished from religious Jewish communities populating prior to the Zionist national awakening, as well as from the diasporic image of the Jew (Ohana & Wistrich, 1996; Meyers, 2005). Thus, drawing on the Jewish calendar and tradition, the Zionist movement relied on a “contemporary reading of ancient symbols, as well as on an actual millennia-old history and existing affinity to a common territory” (Yadlin-Segal & Meyers, 2015, p. 159). The body of research focused on civil religion in Israel looks into the secular rituals and symbols that create the Jewish nationality rather than the Jewish religion. Based on that, my own focus in this dissertation, and specifically while using the term civil religion, is on the secular readings and rituals enacted by the Jewish national society in Israel.

The proximity of nationality and religion in the Israeli-Jewish context turned the concept convenient for analysis of national identity, symbolism, and coherence. In fact, the term is associated in Israeli sociology with the massive migration waves of the 1950s and 1960s. According to Liebman and Don-Yihya (1983), to build immigrants' identification with the state, a system of symbols that transcends religion, and in particular religious differences within Judaism, was required. The Jewish-national civil religion drew on multiple sources to legitimize the Jewish state. Scholars point out different components of this civil religion such as military, agriculture, diaspora, and the Jewish religion. Central component highlighted by scholars in this context is the yearly calendar. Alongside religious holidays such as Passover, the Jewish civil religion constructed civil holidays and days of observance to build the aforementioned unity, legitimacy, and political mobilization. Chief among them are the Israeli Independence Day, Remembrance Day (the Israeli Memorial Day), and Holocaust Remembrance Day, which became key components in the building of contemporary national Jewish identity in Israel.

Here, Jewish Hebrew-speaking Israeli media play a significant role in creating and maintaining the rituals associated with these days and with the civil religion. Print, in particular printed newspaper supplements, was found to be central in fulfilling this function. Published in accordance with the Jewish yearly calendar, newspaper supplements highlighted the sacred, liminal times of the secular civil religion in Israel. They simultaneously constructed and affirmed the central characters, places, and myths of the Jewish national narrative in religious holidays, and established the secular

holidays as equal in importance to religious ones (Meyers. 2002; Neiger, 2003). Through newspapers, the Israeli society built civil rituals, glorifying its heroic members (alive and dead) through worship and mystification.

The main narrative of this Israeli-Jewish civil religion revolved around a voluntary key, privileging acts of heroism and self-sacrifice carried by members of the national Jewish community. The religious commitment here is not to God, but to the land, establishing “a covenant of blood with the homeland which created an eternal bond” (Liebman & Don-Yihya, 1983, p. 40). The dedication to the land is, however, not an all-encompassing one, but rather an ethnocentric one. The sacred land is the Jewish-Israeli land, not Arab or Palestinian. This is a partial commitment, or a “handicapped patriotism” as coined by Yiftachel and Roded (2003).

These aforementioned issues should be assessed when studying Jewish national identity construction. The civil religious symbols become even more interesting on the backdrop of the findings presented in the prior and current analysis chapters. In the case of the Persian community, I have found that members question and push back against oppressive ethnic narratives, looking to re-establish their ethnic identity in Israel. The case of the national identity is a bit different. Members ask to maintain a sense of national belonging in Iran, but at the same time to position themselves as integral to the Jewish Israeli society. As I show in the following sections, members of the Persian community use dominant narratives of the national Israeli story, to place themselves as main players in the Jewish-national community. Here, members create what I define as

an “affirmative opposition,” a cultural act that simultaneously opposes and reaffirms existing social structures.

In this context, members of the Persian community affirm the national narrative by addressing the same yearly rituals of the civil society as systems of social meanings, affirming their sacred position within the national narrative. However, members also oppose the marginality of the Persian community by placing themselves, their family members, other Persians, and the Iranian Jewish community as a whole, as integral and important within these plots. In the following paragraphs, I unpack this “affirmative opposition” with examples related to one of the Jewish-national civil society’s prime observance days—the Holocaust Remembrance Day—that became central to the Israel-Iran diplomatic relations.

As argued by scholars in the field of Israeli studies, ethnic identities play an important role in the discussion about the Holocaust in Israel. A contemporary scholarly interest is focused on the exclusion of the Mizrahi voices from Holocaust related historical narratives as well as Holocaust commemoration in Israel. Interested in the relationship between the national and ethnic identity markers of the Persian community, I wish to focus on this specific day that brings the two into conversation. Hence, in the following section I provide an in-depth review of Holocaust-discourse related research as well as a contextualizing analysis of the ways in which members of the Persian community in Israel perceive and address the topic through the ethnic prism.

Holocaust Remembrance Day

The complex issue of commemorating the Holocaust in Israel can provide content to a long series of thick books, and cannot be thoroughly covered in few single paragraphs. Nevertheless, it is important to review the central narratives that constructed the Holocaust remembrance discourse in Israel. As mentioned before, throughout the first few decades following the establishment of the state of Israel, the Zionist leadership attempted to construct the image of the new Jew, or the new Israeli, a strong and robust, heroic figure opposed to the passive diaspora Jew (Almog, 2000). As a part of that discourse, the Zionist movement constructed a collective memory of the Holocaust that emphasized acts of Jewish rebellion during those years rather than the heroic act of merely surviving those horrors, marginalizing or even muting the voices of the survivors and their personal stories (Zertal, 2005; Yadlin-Segal & Meyers, 2014). Such a narrative was also evident in designating a “Memorial Day for The Holocaust and the Heroism.” Inaugurated in the early 1950s, this day did not only represent the centrality of heroism to the commemoration of the Holocaust, but also represented the centrality of the Holocaust to the identity of the young Israeli state. The Memorial Day was distinguished from the “Tenth of Tevet,” a religious Remembrance Day designated by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel as a "general Kaddish day" (*Yom Hakaddish Ha'klalli*) and other days of Jewish-religious mourning.

These marked the Holocaust as a dominant symbol and ritual of the civil religion in Israel (Meyers, Zandberg & Niger, 2009). Whether by design or not,

the three days were built in a manner that evokes the narrative of destruction and revival of the Jewish people. The Holocaust Remembrance Day falls seven days prior to the Independence Day. “This period of seven days corresponds to the traditional period of Jewish mourning following death, the *Shiva* (literally: ‘seven’)” (Handelman & Katz, 1995, p. 82). Thus, the three together hold an important symbolic meaning to the construction of the national identity in Israel. In this context, I analyze the ways in which members of the Persian community address their national identity on the Israeli Remembrance Day and Independence Day.

During the early years of the State of Israel, Holocaust survivors immigrating to Israel were often perceived as passive victims, lacking ideological drive who were “sent like sheep to the [Nazi] slaughter” (Hilberg, 1985; Segev, 2000). Alongside such depiction, many of the survivors were often blamed in mainstream discourse for “not doing more” or for not openly fighting their persecutors. One of the harshest social questions the survivors had to face during these years was the painful question: “How did you survive?” (Klar, Schori-Eyal & Klar, 2013). This discourse mainly focused on European Jewry. According to Ben-Amos and Bet-El (1999) the heroic social consensus built around Holocaust remembrance began to change in the early 1960s as an outcome of the Adolf Eichmann trial in the spring and summer of 1961. During the trial, private voices of Holocaust survivors living in Israel were shared publicly, often for the first time. New voices were now part of the national discourse about the Holocaust and its memory.

Other important markers in the changing nature of the Israeli Holocaust memory relate to the Six-Day War and Yom Kippur War. In 1967, before and during the Six-Day War, the Israeli political and social discourse focused on the shared national fear of annihilation. The sense of helplessness, thus far identified only with the Holocaust and diaspora life, was viewed as a possibility in the free Jewish state as well (Shapira, 1998). The Yom Kippur War (1973) had profound effect on the social remembrance of the Holocaust. During the war, footage of Israelis taken prisoners was screened on TV, symbolizing weakness and degradation of the Israeli soldier. These, according to Shapira (1998), were considered characteristic of the diaspora Jew and distorted the heroic self-image of the new Israeli. They introduced more and more of the Holocaust discourse to the Israeli day-to-day lives. Thus, the “Holocaust memory has become more privatized due to the shift from official memory agents to individual ones” (Meyers, Zandberg & Niger, 2009, p. 460).

The 1980s further exemplify the move to an individual experience and remembrance of the Holocaust. New critical voices discussing the Holocaust entered the Israeli discourse through literature, theater, dance, cinema, and the visual arts of survivors’ offspring. Nowadays, scholars view the Israeli memory of the Holocaust as a mosaic, built not only upon national and individual Israeli memories, but also on global discourse. The Holocaust memory is seen today as discourse evolving “from the encounter of global interpretations and local sensibilities... These cosmopolitanized memories refer to concrete social spaces that are characterized by a high degree of

reflexivity and the ongoing encounter with different cultures” (Levy & Sznajder, 2002, p. 92).

Throughout these years, the Mizrahi discourse remained relatively muted, albeit reviewed changes, with hardly any efforts given to documenting the experiences of Jewish communities outside of Europe (in Greece, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Lebanon, and the Balkans, for example, Ben-Michael, 2010; Kozlovsky-Golan, 2014; Krosnar, 2003). These communities, while acknowledged in the overall discourse of remembrance, were often referred to as a “side note, as they were not present at the center of events--the heart of the catastrophe in Europe” (Barnovsky, 2013, n.d.). Media representations of Holocaust occurrences in Mizrahi communities are also lacking. Described as a “site of amnesia,” paucity of visual references to the experience of Mizrahi Jewry during the Holocaust was evident in cinema and art. It appears that over the years, “the European calamity dwarfed the experiences of subjugation and horror in North Africa [and other non-European communities] to the point of misperception” (Kozlovsky-Golan, 2014, p. 156).

Within this discourse, I analyze the ways in which members of the Persian community address the Holocaust as a mean of national identity construction. While Persian community is included as part of the Mizrahi group in Israel, and while suffering anti-Semitic attitudes in Iran (as expressed in many Facebook posts and in some of the interviews), Nazi policies did not, in fact, reach Iran during World War II. Online, members of the Persian community address the Holocaust, mainly on Holocaust Remembrance Day, through mainstream narratives. Most posts shared by community

members align with the mainstream narrative of remembrance in Israel. Some posts, however, add places and characters to that narrative, ones that are not included in the European centered story.

Most posts in the two Facebook groups present narratives of annihilation and revival, viewing the existence of the state of Israel as both outcome of and a pushback against the Holocaust. In this context, members do not steer away from the usual Israeli-Jewish remembrance rhetoric, highlighting acts of resistance and heroism related to the establishment of the state. Alongside these references, members also produce unique narratives positioning the Persian community as integral to the revival story. These kinds of narratives are not often (or not at all) shared in Israeli mainstream media.

The “Persian angle” of Holocaust commemoration includes references to event in which Iranians (Jewish and non-Jewish) saved Jewish people from Nazi persecution during World War II. These references included a historical view on stories that are not usually highlighted in Holocaust remembrance discourse. For example, a member posted on “It means you are Persian” a link to the story of Abdol-Hossein Sardari, Iran’s consul in Nazi occupied Paris. The member shared the link, stating “Information you should have, a Persian Muslim who saved Persian Jews throughout the Holocaust.” The link included in the post leads to the story of Parisian-Iranian Jewry during the 1930s and 1940s, sharing newly revealed information about the era:

But how did Iranian Jews escape Nazi harassment in France without fleeing back to their own country? Sardari sought to use the Nazis’ own racist ideology against them, wholeheartedly embracing the Aryan-race

identity for Iranians to staunchly argue that Iranian Jews were not “Jews by blood,” but rather Aryan Iranians who followed the “Mosaique religion” (ie [sic], the religion of Moses). Thus, he maintained, Iranian Jews were not members of the “European Jewish” race and should not be subject to Nazi Jewish policies.

While still focused on Europe, this story places both Iranian Jewish people and Iranian government officials of that era as part of the historical narrative of the Holocaust. By highlighting the Iranian identity of both the Jewish community and Sardari, members adopt the hegemonic narrative of surviving the Holocaust, but do not lose their own ethnic identification within it.

Members of the two Facebook groups addressed another issue related to the Holocaust several times. The story of “Teheran Children” was brought up around the time of the Holocaust Remembrance Day, positioning the Persian Jewish community as central to the story of the Jewish revival in Israel. Teheran children are, according to members of the Facebook group, about 1,000 Jewish-Polish children, most of them orphans, who fled Nazi occupied Europe, and arrived in Tehran after several months of hiding in Russia. The group of survivors arrived in Israel in February 1943, five years before the establishment of the state. In discussions about this story, members highlight that Tehran children were the first and biggest organized group of Holocaust survivors that immigrated to Israel during the war from Nazi occupied Europe. While dates and numbers related to this event vary between sources, official state archives and some online news sources do confirm this story.

Members of the Persian community comment on the story online, stressing the involvement of the Jewish Iranian community in the efforts of saving the kids. “Tehran's Jewish community has supported and helped the group by caring for those orphans who came from Europe... to Tehran. They stayed there for a long period and were treated remarkably [by the Jewish community]. It is not a coincidence that this group of hundreds of children of Holocaust survivors is called “Tehran Children.”” Members also state that since this group was one of the first to arrive at pre-state Israel, the members of the Jewish community in Israel did not understand the extent of the horror experienced in Europe. By saying that, members suggest that the Iranian Jewish community, in fact, had a better hold over the situation than the community in Israel. By doing so, members do not only include the Iranian Jewish community in the remembrance narrative, but also position themselves as central and essential to it.

The Jewish community in Iran worked hard to support the survivors in a period of financial pressing and scarcity. In addition, they were in charge of the saving of the first group of survivors to arrive at Israel, which is an important benchmark in history. In a way, by positioning the Persian community as integral to the story of heroic conduct throughout the Holocaust and the revival of Israel, the Persian community in Israel gains symbolic civil capital. Considering the place of the Holocaust in the Jewish-national identity and the Israeli-Jewish civil religion, the Persian community situate itself as integral to the civil religion.

Drawing on images of the Holocaust, members also connect persecution in Iran with the larger narrative of the revival of the Jewish people in the Jewish homeland. As

seen in Figure 10, the post draws on the iconic visual of European memory of the Holocaust and the Yellow Star of David, while the typed text refers to persecution in Iran: “Antisemitism always existed, even in Iran, on account of hating the other and different!!! only not much have been told about it!!!! We will not forget... with Zionism in their hearts... and longing to the holy land on which they were brought up [sic]... they migrated to Israel and built beautiful families with Iranian heritage.”



Figure 10, Memories of persecution in Iran, reprinted from Lovers of the Persian Language Facebook group, 2016

The posts described above pertain to the past, that is, the acts and occurrences of the Persian community in Iran and abroad throughout World War II and after. Alongside these stories, community members also highlight their active involvement in Holocaust commemoration and supporting survivors in Israel during present times. Members share stories, photos, and videos of themselves and family members meeting with Holocaust

survivors in Israel, stressing the support they offer them in day-to-day needs, arrangements, giving a hand and a listening ear. Members highlight in these posts the national narrative, suggesting that “We have no other country and only together supporting a generation who almost disappeared [i.e. Holocaust survivors] just because of their religion. We must do it for future generations” or “Try to be good to each other, be united, be together, because the whole world is against us... do not let the Holocaust be forgotten.” The “us” members refer to here is not the Persian us, rather the Jewish-Israel us, the national community.

An important takeaway emerges from these examples of Holocaust related posts. Holocaust commemoration constructed by members of the Persian community online challenges, to some extent, the hegemonic accounts of Holocaust discourse in Israel. By referring to Iranian involvement in World War II, members of the Persian community expand the mainstream discourse to include non-European communities in the historical narrative. As Kozlovsky-Golan (2014) argues, the exclusive portrayal of the European survivor was never affixed to survivors of the Holocaust in Arab, and Muslim in our case, countries. In fact, “Every attempt to correct the imbalance by means of documentary films made by Mizrahi Jews met with relative failure and lack of public interest” (p. 156). Online, members of the Persian community help recovering the social amnesia of the stories related to Mizrahi Jewish communities during the Holocaust.

An emerging field focused on web-based remembrance and memorializing, looks at the ways collective memory constructed both by individuals and by institutions via digital and internet-media. This type of digital collective memory “collapses the

assumed distinction between modern “archival” memory and traditional “lived” memory by combining the function of storage and ordering on the one hand, and of presence and interactivity on the other” (Haskins, 2007, p. 401). Scholars studying manifestations of digital memory have tried to distinguish individual acts of commemoration online from more formal, official, institutional, and official acts, using the terminology of the vernacular memory vs. the official memory for that task.

Conceptualized by Bodnar as anti-hegemonic in nature, conveying “non-hierarchical, sometimes subversive symbolism and stress egalitarian interaction and participation” (Haskins, 2007, p. 403), the vernacular memory is seen in online memory studies somewhat differently. It is conceptualized as local, ephemeral, indigenous, informal or unplanned, every-day based commemoration, manifested more immediately after an event rather than via a retroactive commemorative perspective (Muzaini & Yeoh, 2014; Hess, 2007; Foot, Warnick & Schneider, 2006). However, scholars have found that online vernacular web based commemoration and memorials are frequently regulated “not only formally by webmasters, but also in accordance to rules agreed by members” (Muzaini & Yeoh, 2014, p. 8). Public, institutionalized, or hegemonic memorializing practices too often find place on individually produced online commemorative sites, and vernacular memorializing practices appear on official sites.

Thus, as suggested by Foot, Warnick & Schneider (2006) “the distinction between public and vernacular memorializing that has been useful in scholarship of offline memorials is harder to sustain, and perhaps less useful, in studies of Web-based memorializing” (p. 92). The interesting part in this context, is that members of the

Persian community do not push back against mainstream commemoration narratives of heroism or destruction and revival, but rather utilize them to place the Iranian and Persian community as important part of the plot. Remembering the Persian community in this context becomes an important social act, as it allows this community to become, at least in their own mind, a part of the national ethos and the civil religion. It shows us the far-reaching impact of dominant commemoration narratives, and the role they play for minority groups seeking to become integral to hegemonic national narratives.

As Hall (1987) points out, these two sources of identification stand in somewhat of a conflict. Hall argues: “some people now... begin to reach for a new conception of ethnicity as a kind of counter to the old discourses of nationalism or national identity” (pp. 45-46). We see in this chapter that indeed, in light of cultural hegemonic oppression, these are articulated as conflicting ends of the Persian community’s cultural belonging. However, as I continue analyzing posts and interviews related to the national context, I argue that just positioning the two as conflicting is not thorough enough when discussing the complexity of forming either ethnic or national identity within the Israeli society. I find that through collaborative construction of identity, positioning the Persian community as part of the Iranian and Israeli societies, members create a sense of a dual homeland. This duality challenges mainstream Zionist notions of migration. At the same time members, to some extent, criticize current Iranian politics by reminiscing and creating a link between their own Iranian identity and pre-revolutionary Iran.

Creating or affirming shared meanings and identities through collaborative action is among the most satisfying and affirming of human activities.

Being part of a group and reveling in the lived experience of “we-ness” is one of the most important ways that individuals come to have a positive view of themselves and hold their existential fears at bay (Fleigstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 47).

I argued in the previous chapter that the lived experience of “we-ness,” as described in the abovementioned citation, is an ethnic experience. By defining the term “lived ethnicity” I have shown that members of the Persian community in Israel work together to construct an ethnic identity and consciousness, expanding their ethnic identification from liminal and peripheral activities into day-to-day activities. Assessing this lived ethnicity in the national context I find a complex process of identification, drawing on conflicting sources of identity markers.

In the case of the Persian community in Israel, we see a multi-layered “we-ness” through which members create a positive view of themselves. First, there is the ethnic “we-ness” described in length in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I found two more layers of identification that tie into the same sense of “us” or “we:” the Israeli-Jewish national “we-ness” and the Iranian national “we-ness.” We can see that the lived ethnic experience helps to position groups in the national-Jewish we-ness in Israel, that for many years oppressed ethnic identification.

Concluding Remarks: Dual Homelands and the Affirmative Opposition

In this chapter, I have shown how members of the Persian community in Israel create a dual homeland identification, in which they try to position themselves as a part of both Israel and Iran. Earlier in the chapter, I addressed the term “affirmative opposition.” I wish to coin this term as a way to explain the cultural practices through which marginalized groups oppose oppressive social structures, but by means of cultural reproduction end up affirming these oppressions. I have found in the Persian contexts that by positioning themselves as central to the Jewish national narrative, members utilize existing oppressive structures, excluding other groups in society from the national narrative. This finding draws on several theoretical lines of thought. First, I draw on Bhabha’s (1994) articulation of the third space. As discussed in length in the literature review chapter, Bhabha views the third space as a sphere that allows minority groups to formulate oppositional hybrid identities.

In that third space, cultural meanings and symbols have “no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same sign can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew” (p. 55). The identification processes constructed by the Persian community works in a similar logic. Through creating national belonging to both Israel and Iran, they change the Jewish perception of the national homeland, and open the discussion to multiple national identifications. Throughout this process, members create a combination of signifiers that lead to

the formulation of multi-layered identity. Thus, online spheres allow a minority group to bend different sources of identification, questioning and negating the mainstream narratives of those exact sources. However, this is not a completely liberating process. Through this process, members draw on oppressive practices to become central to the Israeli Jewish national narrative.

To fully develop this line of thought a brief review of its theoretical origins is needed. Postcolonial thought enables this study with a critical perspective on culture in Israel, in particular ethnic culture in Israel. Through this perspective, I am able to talk about deconstruction and reconstruction of oppressive cultural practices, addressing online media as an “in-between” third space allowing users to re-think and re-articulate their identities, as presented by Bhabha. However, additional cultural/critical perspectives are required here to further explain the roots of the term “affirmative opposition” as I address it. These two theories come from Hall’s (1980) seminal “Encoding-Decoding” model, and Williams’ (1973/1991) model of cultural change.

Hall’s model focuses on the audience member and the process of decoding media messages and meaning making in different cultural contexts. Focusing on audiences and practices of reception, Hall offers three possible subject positions or interpretive moments. The first, the dominant-hegemonic position, refers to cases in which the audience member takes the connoted meaning from a media text, operating within the dominant cultural code of that given society to extract meanings out of texts. A second subject position is defined by Hall as the

negotiated position. As its name suggests, viewers engage a process of negotiation with both media texts and cultural understandings while extracting meanings out of cultural messages. “Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements” argues Hall (p. 137). Thus, audiences can (but not often do) create a situated reading of media messages, accepting parts of the message while opposing other parts. The third interpretation option is the oppositional position, in which audience members decode messages within an alternative framework, critically reading hegemonic message and producing oppositional meaning making process towards them.

The most important take away from Hall’s model for this dissertation is the negotiated position, bringing together hegemonic and oppositional points of views on media texts and messages. This position, as articulated by Hall, pertains to the audience member’s point of view. That is, while audience members are conceptualized as active interpreters engaged in a meaning making process (rather than passive spectators), they are still just interpreting. The meaning making process does not culminate in creating or publicly circulating media texts through large scale media outlets such as Facebook. Considering practices of online media users, the articulation of the negotiating position has to account for the new production possibilities associated with the “produsers” populating online media. Thus, I seek to combine Hall’s reception theory with Williams’ production theory.

In his article “Base and superstructure in Marxist cultural theory” Williams aims at unpacking the hegemonic processes through consideration of the

Marxist articulation of the cultural “base” rather than the “superstructure” which is usually approached and even over emphasized in cultural studies. Looking at cultural production processes, Williams argues for a “selective tradition” in which two kinds of cultures meet—residual culture and emergent culture. Residual culture includes the experiences, meanings, social and cultural structures, and values of previous social formations. These structures are perceived as a given lived and practiced code, that cannot be verified or expressed outside of or separated from the dominant culture.

In contrast, emergent culture refers to all of the new cultural practices, experiences, meanings, and values growing in opposition or as alternative to the residual culture. In line with Gramsci’s hegemony theory, Williams argues that all of these new practices meet with attempts to incorporate them into mainstream culture. These new and emerging cultural structures are not created *ex nihilo*, but rather act as a reaction to existing structures. Thus, these emerging cultural options will always contain some influence of effective or dominant contemporary practice. This approach, in comparison to Hall’s option of resistance through opposing position, is a bit more pessimistic in terms of agency and cultural change.

How then, can we tie these two approaches—Hall’s and Williams’—to the practices of the Persian community in Israel and to the term “affirmative opposition”? Bringing the two together, I argue that both production and reception practices allow groups and individuals with negotiating spaces. Combining the

two, we can now address internet media users, simultaneously producers and consumers, as able to both resist and affirm social structures through their “emergent negotiating subject position.” Users at once decode and encode complex messages, that contain, at once, affirmative and oppositional messages. They are not just decoding messages, they also further produce or encode messages based on them. These new messages are designed to be publicly circulated and disseminated and thus do not stop at the point of meaning making.

Decoding and encoding acts are thus positioned in a new, different space than the one articulated by Hall. Through the term “affirmative opposition” I seek to capture this dual position—producing and consuming—that allow users to consume, create, mix, and circulate messages that at one affirm and oppose existing oppressive cultural structures.

This notion ties back to the opening quote of the chapter. In it, Freire (1970/2000) addresses similar processes. In the context of education and culture, Freire shows how the oppressed draws on culture of the oppressors, becoming a “sub-oppressors.” Thus, radical liberation might sometimes also reproduce the social oppression it fights. I define this process as an “affirmative opposition,” a cultural act that simultaneously opposes and reaffirms existing social structures.

By positioning the Persian community as central to Holocaust commemoration, members reaffirm the usage of this heroism as signifier of importance in the Israeli commemoration narrative. On the one hand, the usage of this narrative allows the Persian community to negate and criticize their

marginalization within the Israeli society. However, by using this “normative” commemoration practice, members in fact reaffirm the oppression they ask to oppose. By formulating their own identity, users recreate the normative “belonging” to the Jewish history, only now they are able to position themselves on the “correct” end of the spectrum—the European, heroic one. Arguably, while online media do allow users to push back against mainstream narratives and circulate positive self-representations, these outlets also enable the affirmation of existing oppressions.

By using the term “affirmative opposition,” I stress that while some oppositional calls negate negative misconceptions about an oppressed group, they can, in fact, repeat and confirm the social narrative that established the very same oppression. The term allows us to critically engage with cultural practices as complex systems of negotiation, looking at the possible oppositional and liberating aspects of oppressive structures, and vice versa, identifying oppressive practices embodied in oppositional acts.

Through “lived ethnicity” and “affirmative opposition,” members of the Persian community position themselves as central to the two cultures, creating a distinction between the nation and the state. While they are not an integral part of the Iranian state, they do see themselves as part of the historical Iranian nation. While not holding central role in the Jewish state, members formulate their place within the national narrative. Thus, the Persian identity, a cultural source of identification, becomes a bridge between Iran and Israel. The Persian community

represents the linkage between these two nations, and work to bring them together culturally and diplomatically. This notion is further discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VI

NARRATIVES OF DELIBERATION AND CONNECTION: CONSTRUCTING TRANSMEDIA BRIDGES BETWEEN ISRAEL AND IRAN

In the two prior chapters, I have discussed the ways in which members of the Persian community in Israel utilize online media to position themselves within and between Iran and Israel culturally, ethnically, and nationally. This chapter is focused on the ways in which members take part in Israeli diplomatic efforts. This self-proclaimed role is manifested through members' *Hasbara* efforts (literally translates as “explaining,” refers to Israeli diplomatic practices as further explained in the chapter) carried online. Thus, alongside constructing a cultural identity that bring together multiple conflicting identity markers, members also work to construct spheres within which they transcend offline cultural and political limitations, creating new online spheres that position the Persian community as a central political player within the Israeli-Iranian conflict.

To understand the meaning of this self-proclaimed role and self-built centrality, I open the chapter with a brief review of *Hasbara* in the Israeli society. I then move to explain the main *Hasbara* efforts of the Persian community through the analysis of transmedia content creation. By using social media, mobile phone applications, and online radio, members of the Persian community circulate *Hasbara* across multiple media platforms, stressing their essential role in building cultural and political bridges between Iran and Israel. I focus on these three platforms, social media, mobile applications, and online radio, to show how different online outlets enable the blurring of

the national and the private. This transmedia usage allows the Persian community to negotiate their marginality within the two societies, building not only bridges, but also new online spheres in which they can re-imagine their indispensable role in the two nations.

Israeli *Hasbara* as Public Diplomacy

Broadly defined as Israeli public diplomacy, *Hasbara* literally translates as “explaining” and is concerned with the question of the legitimacy of the state of Israel and its military acts (Schleifer, 2003). Monroe Price (2004) defines public diplomacy as state-sponsored information that is “directed at a population outside the sponsoring state’s boundaries. It is the use of electronic media by one society to shape the opinion of the people and leaders of another. It involved what was once with pride called propaganda” (p. 200). Currently coordinated by the Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs, *Hasbara* efforts are geared toward international states and media outlets and are focused on maintaining a positive image of Israel amidst the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Aouragh, 2016; Dart, 2016). This is achieved through collaborating with other official state advocacy institutions, such as the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister’s Office, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) Spokesman’s Office, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, and the Jewish Agency (Dart, 2016).

Scholars critically view *Hasbara* as the synthetic Israeli terminology for propaganda, crafted as supporting actions that are designed to help achieving and

clarifying Israel's somewhat aggressive military and political goals (Schleifer, 2003; Medzini, 2007). Many of these scholars point to the fact that while official efforts are being made to heighten *Hasbara* around recent military acts in Gaza, the international support of these acts continuously decreases. "The basic assumption of the Israeli *Hasbara*" argues Schleifer (2003) "was that the message must reflect the Israeli consensus." However, beyond partially agreeing about the Jewish state, there is not such consensus about any topic in Israel. The Israeli society today has no agreement about what the desired political, cultural, and economic features of the state means, let alone its international image. Thus, *Hasbara* output became inadequate, unable to maintain a positive image of the Israeli state on a global scale (Shoval, 2007). With the lack of agreement and lack of appeal towards global media and nations, official *Hasbara* acts started taking place online, via 2.0 platforms, aiming to facilitate direct communication with supporters and private individuals abroad.

Online, *Hasbara* officials utilize multiple outlets, producing information in both Hebrew and Arabic for local audience, and in English, for wider distribution. Official state offices operate websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr accounts, asking supportive domestic and international audiences to share content produced by them (Deos, 2015; Dart, 2016). These range from Facebook posts, counting in real time Palestinian missiles launching, designed to be easily shared by pro-Israel followers, through opening a Youtube channel for the Israeli President asking followers to connect and talk about peace, all the way to maximizing IDF's tweets reach by asking re-tweeters to use global hashtags such as #WorldCup to heighten visibility. Albeit such

efforts, Israeli *Hasbara* is considered to be unsuccessful, constantly in decline, and unable to achieve Israel's diplomatic needs (Molad, 2012; Shoval, 2007).

What follows in this chapter focuses on online *Hasbara* efforts, voluntary initiated by members of the Persian community. These pertain to the Iranian-Israeli relations, in which members reach out to Iranians worldwide to explain Israeli diplomatic goals. I approach these online practices as *Hasbara* efforts based on the vocabulary used by participants. In multiple online posts, participant observations, and in interviews, participant took pride in community activities they refer to as *Hasbara*, aimed at "raising awareness about the truth," and about the "real issues behind the Israel-Palestinian conflict." Here, they are focused on Iranian-centered *Hasbara*, one that will "open the eyes of the Iranian community worldwide, lift the veil, and circulate the truth, not the lies." The "truth" and the "lies" mentioned by participants are, of-course, subjective political and cultural interpretation of participants in this study, not any political agendas that are promoted or articulated by me as a scholar. The arguments presented in the following paragraphs draw mostly, but not exclusively, on right-wing Israeli narratives. In-line with official Israeli *Hasbara* practices they legitimize Israeli IDF operations and support Israel's right wing agenda towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, becoming part of the Israeli diplomatic array through voluntary acts.

The need for such community-based *Hasbara* stems from what participants call "an Iranian anti-Semitic brainwash" led by the Iranian religious leadership, close supporters of the Palestinian freedom efforts. To maintain a positive image of Israel,

members communicate with Iranian citizens and Iranians in exile, focusing on three main online media platforms: mobile phone applications, social media, and online radio.

Mobile Phone Applications and the Intimacy of National Goals

Israel holds extremely high mobile phone adoption rates, second globally only to Italy. Cellular communication in Israel emerged in the early 1980s as an answer to military transportation needs, mainly for air and sea crafts' communications. The first Israeli public mobile phones service was established in 1986 by the company Pelephone, followed by the establishment of Cellcom (1994) and Partner (1998) (Tsuria & Yadlin-Segal, in press). The diffusion of mobile phones in Israel was quick and massive. As early as 2002, more Israeli phone subscribers held mobile phone lines than landlines. Merely two years later Israeli mobile phone companies had 95.45 mobile phone subscribers for every 100 inhabitants, almost twice more mobile phone subscribers than in the United States (Lemish & Cohen, 2005). A decade later, in 2014, ten million mobile phones were in use in Israel. This means that the number of mobile phone used in Israel exceeded the number of Israeli citizens by two millions.

The most widely used mobile application in Israel is WhatsApp, an instant messaging application that also allows voice conversations over an internet connection. WhatsApp was downloaded by 92 percent of smartphone users in 2013. The unique use of WhatsApp, and instant messaging application as a whole in Israel, points at the strong Israeli family cohesion, in which users attest to have an average of 6 different WhatsApp

groups dedicated specifically to instant messaging with multiple family members at once (Canetti, 2015).

Participants in this study point at a similar trend. To maintain close familial relations with family members in Iran, or those who immigrated to other countries, members use WhatsApp alongside other messaging applications such as Viber, Skype, and Telegram, which became highly popular in Iran. These mobile applications help them maintain communication and stay in touch on a daily basis and on the go, embedded in their daily activities. They send recorded videos, exchange messages, and use live videos to take part in family event such as birthdays and holidays.

Anat, a graduate student in her early 30s, shared more about the use of mobile applications in the Persian community. Anat immigrated to Israel well after the revolution, in 1999 at the age of 16, with her nuclear family. According to her, she was absorbed in the Israeli society quickly. Anat served in the Israeli army and now study in one of the large Israeli universities. She has Persian family members both in Iran and in Europe, with which she maintains daily connection through internet platforms, chief among them instant messaging mobile applications. “With the family in Israel I use WhatsApp, with friends and family in Iran Viber and the Facebook messenger. I do not really know why, but it seems like WhatsApp is less popular in Iran.”

When I ask about the communication barriers and the distractions of internet connectivity in Iran, Anat answers:

The state and leadership in Iran are eager to stop young Iranians from internet usage. They keep on blocking sites, [mobile phone] applications,

and sometimes shut down internet connection completely. But most of the younger generation is not threatened by it. They find ways to break and hack these blocks and inform one another about the platforms that work and the ones that do not. I do think that Facebook and apps are more for the younger generations, but my parents and their friends use them... mainly to keep updated, to send regards on holidays and special days.

The strong familial ties that mobile apps help to maintain are important for migrating communities, but are not surprising, nor do they add much to the literature on migration and digital media usage. The Persian case supports existing understandings of personal usage of mobile applications. As shown, instant messaging is generally used to maintain a small network of users one already knows, rather than to connect to new users outside one's network (Kim, Kim, Park & Rice, 2007). Reflecting on this through the lens of migration studies, media as a whole, and as the case of the Persian community shows us, instant messaging mobile applications, are used to sustain close relations with friends and family members, maintaining an ontological security with the place of origin (Eswari, 2014).

What is interesting and new, is that members of the Persian community in fact do more than just maintain these close relations via mobile apps. Aiming to develop far-reaching *Hasbara* through instant messages, members of the Persian community developed connections with Iranians inside and outside of Iran. "Honestly," says Joseph, "I started communicating about the topics of Israeli agenda because I wanted to practice my Farsi writing and did not have many other outlets." Thus, Joseph joined multiple

Facebook groups of Iranian and Persian culture, and started developing connections that evolved into daily messaging via mobile apps. “You start by talking about yourself, and little by little, you get to explain life in Israel, life in light of the conflict, and you listen to their stories as well.” *Hasbara*, for Joseph, means that you take it upon yourself to explain the conflict to people that might support the Palestinian side. “It is much easier to talk to Iranians in the US and Europe, because they are not as ignorant or brainwashed as the Iranians in Iran,” he argues.

When I ask for concrete examples, Joseph explains that he mainly talks about the high levels of freedom and liberalism in Israel, issues that are often overlooked by worldwide media. “I talk about the truth that is not presented by media in Iran,” Joseph adds. This truth, of course, is highly subjective, and is mainly associated with right wing approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israeli politics. These efforts usually try to normalize life in Israel and emphasize Palestinian attacks on civilian population in Israel. This narrative also legitimizes IDF’s operations, framing them as defensive practices. Regardless of the accuracy of these narratives, these are the main messages shared through what Joseph views as *Hasbara*. When I tried to assess how widespread the phenomenon is within the Persian community, I came across different answers. These differences stem from different understanding of what *Hasbara* means for different participants. Joseph argues that while some members are highly invested, the group of members taking part in *Hasbara* is not big. Anna, on the contrary, argues that most members of the Facebook groups analyzed for this study in fact take part in *Hasbara* efforts, many of them on mobile phone applications. Nonetheless, they all

agree that what they consciously practice is *Hasbara*. *Hasbara* is the term they use to explain these diplomatic efforts.

Anna argues that even by only talking about life as Persians in Israel, members take part in legitimizing Israel in the minds of other Iranians. “The first question that an Iranian will ask you online is ‘do you have Telegram?’ They are desperate for connections and communication, each one for a different reason.” Telegram is a cloud-based mobile phone messenger application. Users can communicate through Telegram with their mobile phone-based contacts that also have the application. Telegram’s main feature is its internationally-reaching high levels of messages security. According to the app developers, messages sent via Telegram “leave no trace on our servers, support self-destructing messages and don’t allow forwarding.” Such features make the application attractive to users who ask to maintain a relative secret communication between Israel and Iran.

Through Telegram, Iranian users can reach information that is considered banned or un-accepted in Iran. Anna mentions curiosity about the west and Israel as a leading reason for reaching out to Persians in Israel. “Some of them also seek out information for the government, thinking they might get pieces of important information by just talking with someone on Viber” she adds. Joseph elaborated on this in one of our correspondences online. “You will come across many Iranian spies online. The government gives them 4-5 Euros a day to find information about Israel on social media.”

Nevertheless, the conversation can also be genuine, and in many cases, lead to friendship. Participant's origin in Iran is an important component in developing such relationships. The shared history and culture make the conversations based on shared language, literally in the case of using Farsi, and figuratively, when talking about being Persian and Iranian. "The fact that we can talk in Farsi and know what it means to live in Iran makes us important players in *Hasbara*. What the state [Israel] is unable to do, we can actually do pretty easily," argues Anna. "Some people might just be extremists or politically hardliners so they do not even listen," she adds "but other than that, we make more connections and explain the situation in Israel better than the official sources." According to participants, through instant messaging, they get to change the political perception of Israel in the minds of Iranians. "Some of them still identify with extreme Islamic ideas, but others really want to know about Israel," Joseph adds. Through mobile phone messaging, the act of *Hasbara* becomes integral to daily routines of the community, bringing transnational politics into the daily usage of online media. Participants that talk about their *Hasbara* online emphasize how national goals become a central conversation topic in messaging.

Contextualizing this assertion within existing literature, the case of the using mobile apps for *Hasbara* expands our understanding of both mobile phone and mobile applications usage. If so far mobile phones were seen as media through which individuals maintained relationships with close social and professional circles (Wallis, 2013), then the Persian community usage expands this notion into transnational efforts of online diplomacy through mobile phones and apps. Here, mobile applications

transcend the personal-familial standard usage to become what Deutsch (1953) named “national equipment.” Users now create new transnational connections via mobile apps rather than only maintaining existing immediate ties, advancing national goals and agendas rather than discussing familial and personal issues.

This important finding shows that what is often contextualized as the most private and intimate medium—the mobile phone—now takes a form of national-related medium. Through the use of this national-centered medium, minority groups, such as the Persian community in Israel, are able to take part in a national discourse and position themselves as central to it. Becoming central players on a transnational level, the Persian community takes the identity that was, for many years, oppressed and silenced, into the open, into public discussions. The private, thus, mixes with the public and the national, creating not only hybrid identities (as shown in the last two chapters) but also unique hybrid media usage.

***Hasbara* through Social Media**

Persian community *Hasbara* take place through other internet platforms as well. “About 10 years ago,” Lara remembered in one of our conversations “there was a TV commercial for one of the large Israeli internet companies, I cannot remember which one.” She went on and described how important this commercial was for her:

You saw a young man walking in an Iranian bazaar, conversing with others, laughing and being friendly, playing Backgammon, sipping on

coffee. Suddenly, the young man takes off his long sweatshirt, and you see he is wearing an IDF T-shirt. The narrator's voice-over is heard, saying 'the internet connects people.' And that just what it does, this commercial just got it perfectly. Since I first got an internet connection, which is quite some time now, I am in touch with many people from Iran, I got closer to people there, developed new friendships... I am telling you this so you will understand that the Iranians have a huge heart. Most of them are peaceful people, only some are anti-Semitic and give a bad name to all the rest.

Lara's use of the internet to connect and reach out to those who are interested in a dialogue was framed by her as "*Hasbara*." She started talking with Iranians around the world—both inside and outside Iran—around 10 years ago. "It started on Yahoo, in their chat rooms," she remembers. "It did not start with the aim of creating *Hasbara*, but it kind of naturally went there. I went into chat rooms about Iran and Persian culture because I wanted to talk in Farsi and about what is interesting for me, which is the Persian culture." Slowly, as the conversations evolved, Lara found herself unpacking the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to explain Israel's policy and military goals. It was important for Lara to mention that she associates herself with the right side of the Israeli political map, and takes pride in her efforts to maintain a positive view about Israel in the international arena.

"At the beginning, you just talk about yourself, your family, life back in Iran, life in Israel today... and when you get to know someone a little bit better, they start to open

up, especially when it comes to politics.” When I try to dig deeper into the reasons led to participants’ *Hasbara* efforts, all of them mention the benefits, in their minds, of the internet over mainstream established media in Iran. Their criticism was mainly that the media in Iran is biased, and Iranian citizens cannot reach the truth about Israel. “I want them [Iranians] to understand the real situation in Israel,” Lara argues. “That we are not their enemies, that the state of Israel has no interest to hurt any Iranian, that our army is not hostile, and that Israel is always there to help in any given situation.”

The main assumption that Iranian media is biased and censored is not wrong. There are, in fact, many restrictions placed on media consumption and production in Iran. That, however, does not mean that the Israeli media provides its consumers a greater level of truth, or a less biased view on Israel-Iran relations. This fact is lost among many of the participants in this study. For them, the relative higher levels of media freedom (at least theoretically) in Israel means greater levels of truth about the diplomatic relations. “Even if Iranians do want to look for information,” Lara tries to explain:

they cannot find it because everything they see in Iran is backed by the government and skewed. What I try to do online is to make sure that they also get another perspective, and I can do it in Farsi, we can talk on the same level, I get them, I get their culture because it is my culture as well. To get in touch in that way you have to speak Farsi, and this is something the Persian community in Israel is aware of. We have a role in this relationship.

According to Lara, her efforts are of the outmost importance because Iranian media outlets circulate false information and lies about Israel. This is, according to her, true both about offline and online media. “Let me give you an example,” Lara offered.

There is this YouTube video of a well-known Israeli Rabbi who is preaching about positive thinking. Someone took the video and added translation in Farsi. The translation says that the Rabbi call Israelis to kill all the Muslim people, all around the world. And of-course, that was not true. That was not what he said. It really drove me crazy, so I took the video and translated it to Farsi, actually telling the truth about what the Rabbi said. Of-course, they were surprised.

Thus, online spheres allow participants to “right the wrongs” they come across online, and circulate information that fits with their views. Joseph supports Lara’s view and practices in another interview. “The ignorance of Iranians in Iran and their anti-Semitism are at heights that I did not imagine,” he argues. He looks back at communal *Hasbara* efforts carried around Operation Protective Edge (2014). “With everything that happened in Gaza, we were able to lower the waves of hate through online *Hasbara*. Then I got to understand how 35 years old ignorance and brainwash of radical Islam looks like.” When I ask what was exactly done I get different variations of examples of online participation. For some *Hasbara* was mainly about presenting the “facts.” This means gathering information about Palestinians’ attacks on Israel from Gaza and around the West Bank, and terror attacks within Israel.

For others *Hasbara* meant sharing information on a plain level field. “Iran was a paradise before the Islamic Revolution, but many [in Israel] do not know about it. In the same way, they [Iranians] know nothing about us.” Joseph points out the scarcity of information about Israel in Farsi. That led him, and other community members, to explain complicated ideas about Israel. These efforts, as mentioned before, are mainly “after the thought” efforts, trying to rationalize and explain military measures. “It is hard to find many supporters of Israel in Iran. Even if someone is a supporter, they would not be vocal about it online, it is too dangerous for them.” That is why Joseph and others choose to conduct one-on-one conversations, which allow them direct and, in their mind, honest connections.

The Facebook language group, “Lovers of the Persian language,” is another example of reaching out and creating a dialogue. While the group is not designed specifically for Israeli *Hasbara*, both administrators share in interviews that they do try to create a place for conversations that go beyond the conflict. These conversations stem from shared interest and love of Farsi. “We try to avoid politics and actually take off all posts that directly talk about the topic,” mentioned Anna, one of the administrators. According to her, the group was opened to talk about language from a place of communal love, not from a place of hate. Promoting the share interest in Farsi of Iranians around the world emphasize the common place rather than the differences, and call out for a dialogue rather than a clash.

One complex issue in this context was the administrative-technological aspect of opening a Facebook group. “At the beginning, we could not decide whether or not to

keep the group open or closed.” The main consideration here was whether or not Facebook users who are not registered to the group can see posts shared by members of the group. “This became important because many in Iran cannot maintain connection with Israelis. They really wanted to be a part of the group, share stories, poetry, and learn about how we use Farsi in Israel.” These Iranian users sent private messages to the administrators, asking them to change the settings of the group and make it close, so they can freely join the conversation. Anna, alongside Ronen the other group administrator, decided to keep the group open. They acknowledged that this might harm the ability of Iranians living in Iran to take part, but it kept the conversation open so that everyone outside of Iran can see and take part.

Noa, an active member of both studied Facebook groups, also takes an active part in creating and circulating *Hasbara*. She, as most of the participants in this study, supports Israel’s military acts towards Palestinians, and presents herself as a proud right-wing supporter. “On the Iranian side, it is harder to speak the truth online. Bloggers are being arrested for defying the government, and it becomes a risk to share information freely, let alone true information.” She expands on this notion:

They think we are cruel to Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. They think we kill kids, and being aggressive. I try to explain that what they see in the news and online might not always be accurate. Some of them are hardliners that will just start cursing and insulting, especially when they find out I am from Israel. But, others, less harsh, actually want to talk and learn, and the conversations are insightful. There is an interest, and I share

information about what is really going on in Israel, and we end up being friends and understand each other.

In her *Hasbara* efforts, Noa tries to reach a common ground with Iranians inside and outside Iran. Her efforts, however, are turned mainly towards Iranians in Iran, as their government is one of the main supporters of the Palestinians. “For Iranian from Iran it does not really matter if you are from Australia or Israel, if you are Iranian you are Iranian,” Noa argues. “And I was born in Iran. It surprises them that I live in Israel, they love to hear about our Persian life in Israel. We actually have more freedom to celebrate traditional Zoroastrian holidays than people in Iran today. It speaks to them, I guess because tradition is stronger than religion.”

According to Noa, Iranians that talk with her online realize that the enemy is not what they thought it would be. “There were a few weird cases,” Noa mentions, “that made me think that I should not be talking with them.” An Iranian Facebook user contacted Noa and after a while told her, that he holds secret intelligence information about Iran, and he wanted to share this information with her. “I really did not know what to do. I called the Israeli police and gave them his contact information, but I never followed up on it, I have no idea how it ended up.” Even with these kinds of interactions in their arsenal, participants in this study all agree that social media became a crucial tool in establishing direct relations with Iranian individuals and share a different perspective on Israel.

“Since I started using the internet I made it a habit to read about Iran. I saw how more and more websites and bloggers from within Iran disappear” Noa explains.

Reflecting upon this, Noa points out the important role social media play in maintaining some alternative voices within the Iranian media sphere. According to her “social media brought critical conversations back.” These “critical” conversations, in her mind are pro-Israeli, and anti-current Iranian regime ones. To support her argument, Noa mentions the Green Movement in Iran, and the centrality of social media to it. “The younger generation tried to create a revolution, and they used social media, Twitter more than other platforms, to create it.” Noa is aware of the fact that this revolution did not accomplish most of its goals, but points at the Green Movement as an event that sheds light on additional *Hasbara* efforts associated with the Israeli-Iran relations.

Focused on the usage of media during the Green Movement, Noa’s comment takes us to the third central online media platform—online radio—used in Israel to create and circulate *Hasbara*. Online radio stations became important players within Israel-Iran relations during the Green Movement, as I further discuss in the following section of the chapter. Here I am focused on Persian, Farsi speaking online radio produced and broadcast online from Israel. As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, I have included in this ethnographic account three online Persian radio stations, operated voluntarily by members of the Persian community in Israel. These are RadisIn, Radio Asal, and Radio Ran. Online and offline interviews were conducted with producers and broadcasters of these three station. I visited two of the station—Radio Asal and Radio Ran, and even broadcasted live in Radio Asal, sharing my research project live with listeners. The broadcasters encouraged me to ask them questions about their own migration story on air, sharing their migration stories with the listeners. This experience

expanded the breadth of this project and allowed me a deeper understanding and gather information about the place of media in forming the Persian identity in Israel. While writing the dissertation RadisIn was closed due to financial difficulties; but interviews with members of the production team are included in this final account.

Online Radio and Imagined Political Roles

Surprisingly enough, during the Green Movement in Iran, Israeli online radio outlets became a venue for Iranian citizens seeking ways to share information and criticism banned and censored by the Iranian government. In this section of the chapter, I focus on this Israeli involvement in the Iranian public life, and further examine participants' online *Hasbara*. I open with a brief review of the Green Movement, followed by additional cross-cultural acts performed by the radio stations.

In the Green Movement, millions of Iranians protested against possible manipulation of election votes that led to the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the president of Iran. The Green Movement protesters demanded a more reasonable and democratic spread of power within Iran's leadership (Tabaar, 2010). Farhi (2012) suggests that the Green Movement is the most important event since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. "With the exception of the revolution itself", Farhi argues, "no other event... has been as politically significant" (p. 3). The movement was an opposition organized by supporters of Mir-Hossein Moussavi, a reformist, revolutionary himself, which ran as a presidential candidate (alongside two other candidates) against Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad. The revolution borrowed Moussavi's campaign color (green), and criticized what was viewed as yet another illegitimate, anti-reformist, tyrannical government in Iran.

During the movement's demonstrations, western media outlets framed it as related to (if not solely facilitated by) online social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Honari, 2014). Twitter, more than any other online platform, was regarded as the medium of choice for the green activists, bringing about the use of the #iranelection hashtag that framed the movement as the "Twitter revolution" (Bruns, Highfield & Burgess, 2013; Gaffney, 2010). "Whether technology was actually driving the protests remains a big unknown," says Morozov (2009, p. 10), arguing that the role of Twitter, and social media as a whole, was not as dominant as attributed to during the Green Movement. "To ascribe such great importance to Twitter is to disregard the fact that it is very poorly suited to planning protests in a repressive environment like Iran's" Morozov continues. "The protests that engulfed the streets of Tehran were not spontaneous nor were they 'flashmobs;' they were carefully planned and executed by the Moussavi camp" (p. 12). Nevertheless, social media are still viewed as important facilitators and catalysts of the movement and allowing a highly important sphere through which the offline acts of movement were organized (Honari, 2014).

"While the response of the Iranian authorities to the protests was initially one of direct confrontation on the streets," argues Lanzillo (2011), "by the end of 2009 the government had begun reevaluating its policies and technologies relating to internet censorship and enforcing stricter methods to limit access." These new methods were visible through policies and practices developed to deal with, monitor, and document

perceived anti-government calls through internet-based media control. Yet, protesters still looked for outlets to share information, criticize the government, and coalesce. Israeli-Persian online radio stations became such an outlet.

Through switchboards in Germany and the United States, Iranian citizens were able to get around the Iranian ban on communication with Israel, and maintained phone connection with Farsi speaking online radio stations located in Israel. They have found the Israeli online Farsi radio stations as a great way to spread information in Farsi to other Iranians, without the fear of being penalized or punished by the government. Being an online source, listeners were able to follow live stream of these radio stations through the web rather than relying on radio waves that do not reach such far distance. The Israeli online radio stations, on the other side of this equation, asked The Associated Press not to record the conversations, allowing Iranians to freely share information on air (or, online) without the fear of being exposed (Heller, 2012).

“During the Green Movement, we got daily calls from Iran. One call even from a hospital in Teheran” shares Rani, a producer and broadcaster in Radio Ran. “An Iranian audience member informed other listeners in Iran about family members who were severely beaten by government officials during a protest” he explains. “Other listeners called during the protests to accuse the government for underreporting the numbers of civilians injured during clashes with the government forces.” Thus, Israeli Persian radio stations became important players in facilitating calls for opposition and anti-government activists during the Green Movement.

An interesting aspect in this context is whether or not this diplomatic involvement of the Israeli Persian community had any impact on the Iranian society. That is, did the Israeli Persian community actually had an active role in organizing and inducing the movement. While this is an important question, it goes well beyond the confines of this dissertation project. The focus here is not the actual impact of Israeli-Persian media texts on the Iranian society, but rather the imagined roles build and enacted by the community online. While the advocacy role the community creates is self-appointed, and to some extent self-congratulatory, it has an important role in re-activating the Persian identity and re-forming the Persian community in Israel.

This self-appointed advocacy role is evident in the ways in which radio broadcasters view themselves and their cultural work within the community. With over 40,000 daily listeners, many of them from Iran, Rani sees himself as an Israeli diplomat. His diplomatic role within Israel-Iran relations exceeds the case of the Green Movement. “We bring people into conversation,” Rani stresses.

We usually get an audience member calling in from Iran, and an audience member calling in from Israel, and we let them talk about a topic of interest. They talk with each other live, and we show that an Iranian Muslim and an Israeli Jew can actually have a conversation and relate to each other. It might be merely symbolic, but it is important in my mind. Israelis are looking for peace with Iran, and our radio can be that bridge. It is only through culture that we will be able to change the conflict.

Radio Ran (ran is the state internet suffix for Iran), is an online radio that has been broadcasting in various formats since the year 2000. Ironically enough, the radio station is operated from a public bomb-shelter located in Or-Yehuda, a city in central Israel. The local municipal authorities allowed Radio Ran to use the shelter with the promise that will keep its maintenance and functionality in case the public will need to use it during a missiles attack. From this war-centered structure, Rani produces calls for peace. “The radio is based on volunteer work,” Rani explains. “No one is getting paid. We see it as a mission. We act as a bridge.” The bridge that Rani describes is, in-fact, multiple bridges that are built between multiple communities simultaneously.

First, the radio attempts to build bridges between Iran and Israel. This is seen in activities described above such as getting Iranians on air, creating discussions between Iranians and Israelis, and also maintaining a Farsi based radio so that listeners in Iran can understand and be informed about issues related both to Israel and Iran. Another way to build these bridges is through bringing celebrities to be show broadcasters. One of them is Shahnaz Tehrani, a famous Iranian film actress, known for her highly successful pre-revolutionary movies. She became an attractive feature in the radio station for listeners around the world.

Rani further expands on the appeal of the radio to Iranian audience. “The radio mostly broadcast music in Farsi, but we also have talk-shows and entertainment”. On Friday mornings, Radio Ran broadcasts a show that is recorded in Iran. This is a stand up and entertainment show, that some well-known entertainers from Iran produce and record for the Israeli radio station. “We cannot reveal their names, but they are Muslim,

and they also include jokes about Iran, the culture, and the economic situation. They have a statement, a critical view about the government, so we try to keep them anonymous and safe.” By including this weekly show, Radio Ran is both able to highlight the rich culture of Iran, and to be appealing to listeners both in Israel and Iran.

Additional bridge is built between old and new members of the Persian community in Israel. “We work to socialize new immigrants, explaining what needs to be explained about Israel, we create connections for them to the Persian community, etc.,” says Rani. By that he means that often, the radio station acts as an interpreter of the Israeli society for new comers. Broadcasters explain Israeli politics, culture, and social affairs, socializing Persian immigrants through a Persian perspective. Finally, Radio Ran members view themselves as a bridge between Persian Jews in Israel and Persian Jews in diaspora. They keep Jewish Iranians informed about the community in Israel, and maintain their relations with their perceived “homeland.” “At the end of the day” Rani asks to stress, “what we do is try to push the conflict [Iran-Israel conflict] into peace.”

As part of this peace effort, Radio Ran took part in opening an Iranian embassy in Jerusalem. This was a cultural collaboration with The Great Flood Collective, known in Hebrew as *Hamabul* Collective. According to their Facebook page, The Great Flood Collective consists of “artists, activists, and intellectuals who seek to change public perception of social tensions in Israel.” By using media and art as vehicles for change, the collective aims to bring together groups that were once divided and create “alternative, constructive dialogue and promote social change that highlights relevant current social issues.”

One such project was the opening of an Iranian embassy in the heart of Jerusalem (Figure 11). Rani explains this act in an interview:

We tried to show that there could be peace if we can take the situation into our own hands. Our governments are not going to change anything, we, the people, can. This is an embassy of the people, civic initiative, cultural, not political or governmental. This is, in my mind, the only viable option for deliberation and dialogue.



Figure 11: Iranian Embassy event invitation, reprinted from *Hamabul* Collective Facebook page, 2015



Figure 12, Iranian Embassy in Jerusalem, reprinted from *Hamabul* Collective Facebook page, 2015

As seen in Figure 12, the embassy included both the Iranian and Israeli national flags, and exhibited Iranian and Israeli art that relates to the cultures and conflict. The station Radio Ran opened in the embassy added an additional layer to this relationship, bringing the post-revolutionary Iranian culture into the conversation. As part of the event, Rani interviewed an exiled Iranian poet, Payam Feili. His visit to Israel coincided with the opening of the embassy, and one of his interviews with Radio Ran was conducted in the embassy itself. Another interview was conducted while I visited the radio station, in it I had the opportunity to learn about the young poet's struggle. Feili is a Muslim Iranian poet who fled Iran in 2015 because of the persecution he faced over his sexuality. He is unable to go back to Iran, like members of the Persian community in

Israel. Including an interview with him, with the post-revolutionary flag situated next to the Israeli flag (as seen in Figure 13 and Figure 14) adds a critical statement to the event. Here we see that the call for peace also calls to restore Iranian social structures established prior to the revolution.



Figure 13, Radio Ran station in the Iranian Embassy in Jerusalem, reprinted from *Hamabul* Collective Facebook page, 2015



Figure 14, Payam Feili (middle) at the Iranian Embassy in Jerusalem, reprinted from *Hamabul* Collective Facebook page, 2015

The problematic relations between Iran and Israel are a topic that further comes up in interviews with additional Israeli Persian radio stations. Shaharam, a producer and broadcaster in Radio Asal expands on the topic. He also had many Iranians calling his radio shows during the Green Movement in Iran. Alongside his emphasis on the importance of facilitating such calls, he shares the other side of online activism. “We experienced several instances in which our servers were taken down by hackers. The proxy of these users came from Asia, but since we had close ties with audience members from Iran back then, we knew these were supporters of the hardliners.” Just like Radio Ran, Radio Asal had Iranians call in to the station and go on-air with similar social and political calls. “They shared their fears, how they are poorly treated by the government,

how they were hurt physically by government officials. Letting them share this anti-government information with other listeners made some hackers take us down.”

Broadcasting from Holon, a city on the central Israeli Mediterranean coast, Radio Asal aims at bringing Iranian-Persian culture into Israel. The station produces events with Iranian musicians, and make sure to maintain a lively cultural life within the community.

Alongside the cultural bridges, all three radio stations stress the issue of *Hasbara*. For them, letting Iranians learn about Israel, and letting Israelis keep in touch with Iran, is one of the most important aspects of their cultural-diplomatic work. Shirley, a member of RadisIn is a leader in the field of *Hasbara* according to many community members interviewed for this study. I interviewed her and got to learn more about the different practices of *Hasbara* in the community. “I started to work on *Hasbara* around Protective Edge Operation when I saw how weak Israel’s official *Hasbara* efforts are” Shirley explains. She adds:

Iranians live in an Iranian bubble for over 37 years, and that is the source of their hate towards Israel. We do not have a shared border, we have an ancient relationship between Iran and the Jewish people that goes back all the way to the times of Cyrus. There is no actual reason for us to not hold warm relations.

While the issue of the Israel-Palestinian relations is central to state-led *Hasbara* efforts, participants do not tend to mention it as a possible source of conflict between Israel and Iran. It seems like participants do not view it as a reasonable issue for establishing such heated relations between the two states.

RadisIN, Shirley's radio station, was closed as I finalized collecting data for this study. Similarly to Radio Asal, it was also operating out of Holon, a city highly populated with Iranian migrants. A team of around 40 volunteers worked to stream RadisIN over the internet an audience of Farsi speakers. When I ask for a central example of how RadisIn maintains *Hasbara*, Shirley points out an interview she held with Reza Pahlavi, the Crown Prince of Iran. Reza Pahlavi is the last heir of the Pahlavi family, currently lives in exile in the United States. He is the son of the late Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. "I wanted to show that the conflict is not between Iran and Israel, but between the religious hardliners in Iran and what Israel represents in their minds" Shirley explains the motivations to conduct the interview. The Prince cooperated and talked about normalizing the relations with Israel. "Our shared problem is the religious leadership." By "our" Shirley means Israeli and the exiled Iranian population.

Shirley's *Hasbara* efforts stress that Iranian community leaders outside of Iran view Israel as a legitimate ally. Her efforts are directed at Iranians within Iran, as well as Iranians in exile that might hold anti-Israeli political views. Similar to other stations she wants to build bridges between Iran and Israel, and to re-establish the relations that were lost with the Islamic Revolution. Again, we can see how participants construct an idealized Iranian homeland, ignoring important factors such as Israel's role in maintaining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and over emphasizing pre-revolutionary Iranian notions of nationality, ethnicity, and culture. To re-create these relations, many of the participants minimize the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the far-reaching power of the religious government. Instead, they stress cultural similarities

and anti-governmental calls that help imagining Iranian-Israeli relations based on civic engagement rather than governmental efforts. Thus, Israeli-Persian radio stations become another site for including the Persian community in Israeli politics. They also become important facilitators of anti-Iranian government calls from around the world. Members of the Persian community use media and *Hasbara* to position themselves as central players within both communities and nations, re-imagining the two communities.

Concluding Remarks: Explaining the Nation

In this chapter, I have endeavored to contextualize the process of Israeli *Hasbara* within the online practices of the Persian community in Israel. I have focused on the ways in which Israeli military and diplomatic goals are weaved into the cultural practices of the community, creating new spheres of communication in which the private and the public are blurred. Through new media usage, participants in this study were able to construct and maintain their ethnic and national identity markers, but also to create online spheres in which they are positioned as main players within and between Israel and Iran. I found this through the analysis of participants' usage of three online media: mobile phone instant messaging mobile applications, social media platforms, and online radio.

Focused on *Hasbara* efforts within the Israeli-Iranian relations, participants in this study advance our knowledge about the usage of mobile applications. While the use of mobile phone is considered to be one of the most private and intimate media usage (Balsamo, 2012), participants in this study show how it is used, in fact, for public

national efforts. Moreover, instead of only maintaining personal, mostly already existing social relations, members of the Persian community use instant messaging mobile applications to find new transnational connections with new users. Through these relations, members advance national goals, focusing on bettering the image of the Israeli society in the eyes of Iranians worldwide. Through mobile phone applications, members of the Persian community blur the lines between the private and the public, bringing the national into their most intimate media use.

Through the usage of social media platforms, mainly Facebook, participants in this study also advance our knowledge about *Hasbara*. While some are focused on legitimizing aggressive military practices, other members are focused on dialogue through normalizing the Israeli day-to-day life. By stressing the cultural similarities between Iranians and Israelis, members of the Persian community try to change the public perception of Israel, and build bridges between Iran and Israel. By stressing their cultural heritage, and national and ethnic belonging in Iran and Israel, members position themselves as leading diplomats, maybe the only ones who can truly create and maintain an open conversation between Iran and Israel. Once again, the Persian identity becomes germane to both the community's media usage, but also to their essential role in the two societies.

Operating Persian radio stations in Israel further advance these findings. Through radio stations, members of the Persian society build cultural bridges between Iran and Israel. They connect listeners, creating a space in which national differences are pushed aside and shared cultural interests become vital. This is also enabled by under-playing

the importance and power of the current Iranian religious regime as well as the significance of Israel's part in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, by enabling an un-filtered and un-censored media usage, Israeli Persian radio stations become players in Iranian politics. This was most evident during the Green Movement, but is still true in day-to-day broadcasting of Iranian and Israeli content. The stations draw on Farsi content to bring the two groups of listeners together, building a shared sphere that does not exist offline.

Thus, positioned between two nations and two cultures, members expand the standard personal use of online environments to move from the margins of the two societies into the center, becoming essential players in a self-constructed transnational sphere. This transnational sphere is an imagined one, allowing members to take it upon themselves to change the problematic aspects, in their minds, of the two societies and the perception of their two homelands. On the Israeli side, members work to maintain a positive international image of the state, taking upon themselves the task of *Hasbara* and somewhat under-playing the weight of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Members normalize culture and politics in Israel to stress similarities between Iran and Israel. On the Iranian side, the Persian community in Israel becomes a player in Iranian anti-regime calls through transnational radio broadcasting. These newly constructed trans-media sphere becomes what I wish to coin as an "online homeland," further defined and contextualized in the following final chapter of this dissertation.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS: BUILDING ONLINE HOMELANDS

Two main assumptions stand at the heart of this dissertation project. The first is that online environments allow individuals to re-think their identities and cultures with new levels of freedom for creating and circulating media content related to them. As shown by other scholars, this assumption is relevant to the context of religion, gender, race, and more. The second assumption is that minority groups, as a whole, and migrating communities in particular, seek to form cultural enclaves. In them, they can negotiate belonging and celebrate self-constructed identities and cultures away from the dominant mainstream culture in which they are oppressed. Thus, the focus of this project was given to the discursive space built by media users, rather than to the practice of using media. I paid less attention to the actual practice of operating a digital radio console, and more attention to the transnational discussions and notional space facilitated through it. In the same way, I looked at the importance members pay to the usage of mobile application, rather than their designed or actual usage. I prioritized a discussion that address the sphere enabled by these media and the cultural practices they allow.

Bringing the two assumptions mentioned above into conversation, I ask questions about the relationship between media usage and the sense of belonging. I look at the ways in which users employ different media platforms to communicate ethnic and national identities. I show how online media allow post-migration community—the Persian community in Israel—to establish a transcultural and transnational media

enclave that simultaneously distinct them from mainstream public culture, but at the same time create a new public discussion, making the community visible to itself and others. In this space, community members draw on multiple sources of affiliation that shape the identity of the group.

These sources, allow the community to experience being Persian through conflicting lenses, negotiating acceptance and exclusion through ethnicity, nationality, and culture. As I elaborate later in this chapter, I term this enclave space as an “online homeland,” to stress the forming of a sense of belonging on ethnic and national levels. Through this sphere, members of the Persian community in Israel position themselves as central players in the Israel-Iran diplomatic relations. They re-build their Persian identity between Iran and Israel through intermedial usage of online platforms. Thus, they form a community and a cultural identity that encompass mainstream cultures from Iran and Israel, yet still allow them to pick and choose the elements of these cultures that go into their self-constructed cultural sphere. Maintaining a positive self-representation, the community move from the social and cultural periphery of Iran and Israel to the center of their own sphere, becoming dominant players in cultural and political practices.

The current chapter presents a discussion of the central findings of the multi-sited ethnography conducted to explore the above-mentioned identity construction and cultural negotiation of the Persian community in Israel. This exploration led to three focal points that are further contextualized here: 1) formulating ethnic identity, 2) constructing national identity, and 3) building transnational bridges. In this conclusion

chapter, I position these three findings within the larger theoretical perspectives employed in this dissertation, to discuss the term “online homeland.”

Formulating Ethnicity: The Persian Identity as a Lived Ethnicity

The Persian community in Israel is included under the Mizrahi ethnic category, perceived within the context of the Israeli melting pot as inferior to the absorbing Israeli society led by the Ashkenazi group. Focused on the ethnic facet of the Persian identity in Israel, I argue that members of the Persian community in Israel find online environments as a liberating sphere, allowing them to negate and negotiate ethnic social and cultural hierarchies established in the Israeli society. Four different circles of identification are central to this negotiation process. These are the national Jewish community in Israel, the religious Jewish community in Israel, the Mizrahi ethnic metagroup in Israel, and the global Persian community in Iran and in diaspora. All of these are brought into members’ discussions through their ethnic perspective and identification. I have attempted to understand the meaning and structure of this ethnic identity, and the role online media play in forming and negotiating it. I have found that the cultural isolation members have experienced over the last several decades led to a much-needed self-expression online. Online, members of the Persian community were able to collectively bring their ethnic identification and culture to the front of the stage, drawing on it to re-create a sense of home, community, and self-definition.

Thus, the ethnic perspective becomes a central, yet not singular, point of reference and an interpretation frame for community members. By referring to each of these social circles, members of the Persian community create a complex process of identification that constantly moves between inclusion and exclusion of the Persian community and other social communities inside and outside the Israeli society.

In the national context, I argue that members of the Persian community use online media to create a sphere that enables an ethnic-cultural pushback against historical ethnic oppressions in the Israel society. Building the national Jewish community, Israeli culture asked its members to shed any foreign ethnic identification associated with the Jewish dwelling in diaspora. This Israeli melting pot presented any ethnic identification as deviant from the “clean” and “favorable” national Zionist identity. Online, and in retrospective, members of the Persian community find a place to somewhat resist this ethnic-cultural flattening. Drawing on the community’s collective memory and unique culture, members create and circulate hybrid Persian media texts, to re-build their identity and sense of belonging via online environments.

Building inter-community cohesion while estranging themselves from the larger Jewish community is also true in the religious context. I found that members of the Persian community put forward their Persian religious uniqueness through presenting Jewish-religious practices distinct to the Persian ethnicity. These were brought with the community from Iran. At the same time, religious identity markers help the Israeli Jewish Persian community to distinct themselves from the larger Persian community worldwide. While in the Israeli context, Persian Jewish practices of religiosity are used

to highlight the unique place of the community within the Jewish religion, these same markers are also used to religiously distinct Persian Jewish individuals from Muslim or any other kind of Persians. Thus, the Persian community seems to stress their Jewish identity characteristics, underlining their unique place within the global Persian society. The same source of identification—religion—is used to simultaneously include and distinct the Persian community in Israel from the larger Persian community worldwide, and from the Jewish-religious community in Israel.

The Persian ethnic identity is also naturally the center of the community's discussions of the Mizrahi group in Israel. Pushing against longstanding cultural oppressions, members of the Persian community highlight their sense of belonging to the Israeli Mizrahi group, performing solidarity with other migrants from Muslim and or Arab countries against the Ashkenazi cultural hegemony. At the same time, I find that the community re-produce hegemonic ethnic structures, using the Jewish Yemenite community as a scapegoat on which they discuss using the stigmatic stereotypes associated with the Persian community in Israel. I argue that this practice is consistent with practices of cultural oppression presented since the establishment of the State of Israel. Here, yet again, community members create a movement between belonging and estrangement, somewhat in, somewhat out of the Mizrahi group.

Within these contexts, the Persian ethnic identity becomes a central locus of interpretation. Community members moved it from the privacy of their homes to the open sphere of the internet, as well as from the liminality of holidays and cultural occasions to the routine of day-to-day lives. I argue that ethnicity both informs and is

informed by the Persian community's wish to formulate identity and a sense of belonging in specific national, religious, and global context. It becomes an interpretive framework through which members read day-to-day activities (such as online media usage). At the same time, this ethnic identification is being formed and molded by media usage. The dynamic relations between ethnicity and everyday life leads me to coin the term 'lived ethnicity.' Drawing on two existing concepts—lived religion (Ammerman, 2006) and ethnicity in motion (Moreno, 2015)—I address ethnic identities as fluid and context dependent. In the Persian context, the lived ethnic identity, which originated in the physical movement of the migrating community, keeps on changing and evolving, feeding and being fed by users online.

“Lived ethnicity” becomes useful as a concept when we think of and study political-cultural identities in spaces of contention. The Persian case in Israel shows us that post-migration individuals work within a space of oppression, gaining a sense of belonging on the backdrop of cultural, economic, and political marginalization. From a place of shame and embracement of mainstream cultural oppressions (that is, shedding ethnic identifiers, ignoring one's own cultural-ethnic heritage), participants moved into a cultural space in which they purposefully enact their Persian ethnicity they used to hide. Most of them attest that the larger volume of partners experiencing the same process allowed them to overcome the shame and self-oppression, and to actively seek ways to express their ethnic identity on a daily basis. The online media enclave members created for themselves enabled that. Being a part of a Facebook group followed by over 16,000 like-minded individuals, who shared a similar past, makes the process of constructing

the ethnic identity a central practice in the participants' life. The cultural struggle and opposition becomes a shared effort that is now visible to the community.

Morano (2015) argues in this context: "postcolonial notions that emphasized a Mizrahi struggle over national resources and hegemony obviously reflected a political reality, the latter ought to be contextualized in relation to the dynamic networks of Mizrahi "strugglers"" (p. 306). To connect the Persian efforts with other Mizrahi efforts, we must first contextualize these efforts in broader terms that will fit a cross-cultural process. Through defining the term "lived ethnicity" I contribute to our ability to understand identity construction processes in concrete terms, but also to our ability to compare and contrast the Persian lived ethnicity and ethnic struggle with other Mizrahi groups' lived ethnicity. The term thus allows us a comparative tool to further explore ethnic struggles within and outside of Israel.

Constructing Nationality: The Persian Identity as an Affirmative Opposition

Drawing on the case of the Persian community in Israel, I endeavor to understand how migrating communities and ethnic minorities negotiate and address national belonging, building a space that integrates the ethnic and the national social orders rather than just conflicting the two. Through the multi-sited ethnographic account, I have shown how members of the Persian community in Israel create a dual homeland identification, in which they try to position themselves as a part of both Israel and Iran, embracing and rejecting multiple national narratives on both sides. On the one hand, members stress

their essentialist belonging to the Iranian nation. Drawing on Persian culture and language, they question the Jewish Israeli narrative deeming Israel as the homeland of all Jewish diaspora. By stressing that Iran plays the role of a homeland, members, to some extent, flip the notions of “homecoming” and returning to a patrimony, establishing their time in Israel as a forced outcome rather than an ideologically-driven choice.

At the same time, participants often go back to the Zionist narrative that positions Israel as the homeland and the safe haven of Jewish people worldwide. Remembering harassment and persecution experienced in Iran, some members bring the homeland hierarchy back to the front of the stage, deeming Israel as their natural homeland. In-line with such depictions, members reaffirm existing national narratives, many of them oppressive and discriminatory. This practice brings us back to the notion of the “third space” offered by Bhabha (1994) as a lens for understanding processes of identity construction.

The third space is a sphere that facilitates minority groups’ construction of and dialogue about oppositional hybrid identities. These identities, whether on a local or a global level, are characterized with high levels of fluidity, open and ready for appropriation, negotiation, de-construction, and re-construction. Forming a notional third space becomes crucial for marginalized groups in context of contention, as it allows the re-thinking of social and cultural constraints and oppressive structures. The identification processes constructed by the Persian community fits with the logic of the third space. Performing sentiments of belonging to both Israel and Iran, members of the Persian

community in Israel re-think the Jewish perception of the national homeland, opening a space for discussion about dual national belonging. This notional process is enabled by narratives built through interconnected online media platforms. These platforms, in turn, advance users' ability to steer away from mainstream cultural and social structures and negotiate their place in society.

However, I argue that this is not a process of complete liberation. Negotiating their place in society through online environments, members of the Persian community draw on oppressive practices to become central to the Israeli Jewish national narrative. I describe this process as an "affirmative opposition," the cultural acts through which marginalized groups oppose oppressive social structures, but by means of cultural reproduction end up affirming parts of these oppressions. Members reproduce existing silencing commemoration practices of the Holocaust, as well as ethnic scapegoating of other minority groups (such as the Jewish Yemenite community in Israel). These enable members to position themselves as central to the Jewish national narrative. Yet, members also exclude other groups from the dominant national narratives.

The term "affirmative opposition" follows a long line of postcolonial thinkers who focus on the voices of marginalized in society. In one such account, Spivak (1988) asks: can the subaltern speak? The answer to this question is – yes, but with certain limitations. Spivak argues that unless marginalized groups are validated by dominant forms of knowledge and politics, resistance could not be heard or read, that is – recognized. Spivak emphasizes that calls of resistance and opposition find voice through mainstream, dominant, and hegemonic discourse, or otherwise they will not be

acknowledged. To this Bhabha (1994) adds the concept of mimicry, pointing at the act of subversion through imitation. Bhabha argues that while reconstructing the identity of the colonized, minorities might have to function, in the very least, through the means of production of the colonizing group. Together, the two show us that any opposition process contains both the cultural and political discourses as well as the actual means of production (media outlets for example) of the oppressive.

Defining affirmative opposition, I draw on this logic, and ask to expand it. First, using online media, the Persian community in Israel constructs a space that is, to some extent, less subsumed under the Israeli media cultural constraints. This is not to say that online media are free of any constraints, but rather that using them to create a shared space for the community, allows the community to become visible enough for itself, but far away enough from the public Israeli eye. Moreover, instead of only asking how minority groups change their identity and self-construct narratives to fit with hegemonic colonizing voices, I add another question. In the investigation that led to coining the term “affirmative opposition” I ask about the ways in which minority groups change hegemonic narratives to position themselves as central to the colonizing process. In line with the postcolonial thought, emphasizing such questions allow us to understand how marginalized groups both oppose and affirm colonizing practices.

Thus, through “lived ethnicity” and “affirmative opposition,” members of the Persian community use online media as cultural enclaves. They position themselves as central to the Israeli and Iranian cultures, creating, to some extent, a distinction between the nation and the state. On the one hand, members are not an integral part of the

contemporary Iranian state, yet they still present themselves as part of the historical Iranian nation. Online, users create national narratives that negotiate their ethnic belonging to the Iranian nationality. On the other hand, members push against a historical narrative that stresses the exclusion of the Persian community from central sources of power in the Jewish state. By re-imagining their communal history, members are also able to negotiate their place in the national Jewish narrative in Israel.

Creating Transnational Bridges between Iran and Israel

Contextualizing the process of Israeli *Hasbara* within the online practices of the Persian community in Israel, I argue that members blur the private with the public, the personal with the national, blending national diplomatic efforts with the most intimate types of media usage. These blurring lines facilitate the community's call for dialogue with Iranian citizens. Through *Hasbara* online, members normalize the Israeli day-to-day life, imagining their own place as central diplomatic players in the relationship between Israel and Iran. Stressing their cultural heritage, as well as national and ethnic belonging in Iran and Israel, members of the Persian community in Israel position themselves as leading diplomats through internet-based media.

This process is highly visible in the context of Persian radio broadcasting in Israel. Online radio stations allow members of the Persian community to build cultural bridges between Iran and Israel. The radio stations bring listeners of both nations together, creating a space in which national differences are pushed aside and shared

cultural interests are highlighted. Israeli Persian radio stations also position themselves as players in Iranian politics, voicing anti-government Iranian calls from Iran and Israel. This is mostly enabled by under-playing the importance and power of the current Iranian religious regime as well as the significance of Israel's part in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Focusing on citizens rather than governments, the community emphasizes civic engagement that calls for the renewal of the diplomatic relations between Israel and Iran. At times this refers to contemporary Iran, at times to an imagined, pre-revolutionary Iran. The stations draw on Farsi content to bring the two groups of listeners together, building a shared sphere that does not exist offline.

Focused on *Hasbara* efforts within the Israeli-Iran relations, participants in this study also advance our knowledge about the usage of mobile applications. I argue that participants in this study use mobile applications, and particularly instant messaging applications, to advance public national efforts. Instead of only maintaining personal, mostly already existing intimate social relations, members of the Persian community use instant messaging mobile applications to find new transnational connections with new users. These relations are formed mostly to explain and advance national diplomatic goals, focusing on bettering the image of the Israeli society in the eyes of Iranians worldwide. Thus, the usage of mobile phone applications allows members of the Persian community to blur the lines between the private and the public, bringing the national into their most intimate media use. This brings us back to the notion of the media enclave, in which users advance their cultural and political causes through media usage that is distinct from the public eye. The “public” becomes a new public, not the Israeli per se or

the Iranian per se, but a blend of participants that use media to become publicly visible to like-minded users, of similar background, away from the oppressive publics in Israel and in Iran. Becoming central players in their imagined ethnic-national sphere, members of the Persian community in Israel construct what I term as an “online homeland.”

Building Online Homelands

The above-mentioned findings lead to the conceptualization of the “online homeland.” I define this concept as a sphere constructed and enacted within and between online and offline spheres by members of migrating communities. In the case of the Jewish Persian community in Israel, it is a sphere of meeting for Persians who were born in Iran and those who were born in Israel. It is a sphere in which the community expresses longing and nostalgia for past memories, but also where members are learning about the Persian heritage, culture, and language for the first time. In this sphere the community constructs, also for the first time, a reconciling image of itself, after years of cultural and social oppression. It is a sphere that takes the perceived good of both nations and citizenships (Iranian and Jewish/Israeli), and enables the members to make amends with the hardships they have experienced in both locations.

The online homeland is not a physical place, but it brings together many spheres, places, and locations within and between Iran and Israel. This sphere is based on the offline characteristics of its members (nationality, ethnicity), flourishes online through the usage of various internet-based platforms such as social media, online radio stations,

and mobile applications, and trickles back offline to community meetings and the ways in which community members acknowledge ethnicity and nationality in their lives. This sphere enables the Persian community to create and maintain an idealized identity, overcoming the social and cultural limitation experienced in Israel and Iran.

The online homeland is a manifestation of the complexity embodied in the concept of diaspora. It is a sphere that shows that national or ethnic identities cannot be neatly divided, questioning the conflation of homeland, religion, and nationality in the Jewish Zionist narrative in particular, and in national grand-narratives overall. By creating a dual nationality, members create a sphere that brings together their two-perceived offline, physical homelands, into a space that becomes, in of its own, the homeland of this new identity. The multi-layered identity experienced by Persians in Israel reveals the importance of such spheres for marginalized groups that want to preserve their culture, but also important for younger generations that want to connect with their parent's heritage. Members negotiate, relive, and even imagine their ethnic and national identity in an idealized way. They blend existing cultural, ethnic, and national forms (through music and memory for example) to create a new understanding of being an Iranian Jewish Persian in Israel.

In the Israeli context, such space is unique to the Persian community as it encompasses an emotional attachment to two homelands at once, one that view their place of origin as the enemy, and the other that does not allow them to come back, even for a visit. Thus, the case of building an online homeland is different from similar acts of nostalgia and sentiments carried by Moroccan, Polish, or Brazilian Jewish immigrants in

Israel, that can go back and visit their place of origin. The online homeland that Persians build allows them to emotionally and intellectually visit a place that they cannot, or are afraid to actually enter. In the online homeland, Israeli-Persian community members hold an imagined dual citizenship in a community of sentiment that is not forced or articulated externally for them, but rather by them. Thus, the term expands our conceptual understanding of the concept “diaspora” in the Jewish-Israeli context. As the media usage of a post-migration community show, communities living in Israel post-migration express nostalgia and longing to a home that was left, draw on the collective memory of this homeland, and seek to establish its cultural practices in the new locality. These practices show that migrating to Israel, for some communities, might not mean returning home. Flipping the Zionist narrative, some community members show that living as a Jewish person in Israel can in fact still be considered as living in diaspora.

The concept of online homeland also expands Anderson and Appadurai’s notions of the imagined community and the community of sentiment into the online sphere. In line with notions of changing spatial arrangement, the online homeland is seen as a space rather than a place (Castells, 1996/2000). The community built around the online homeland is significant in the lives of its members. It goes well beyond Facebook posts and instant messaging, and is acknowledged as such by participants in this study. It is as constructed and imagined as the imagined community and the community of sentiment, yet with the movement online, users play a much greater role in its formation.

Why then, do I choose to name it a homeland rather than just a constructed online community? The answer lays in both the sentiment given to this sphere by

participants and the identity this sphere allows them to build. First, online spheres allow participants to construct a reconciling identity, inclusive of both their Iranian and Jewish national identities, as well as their Jewish and Persian ethnic identities. According to many of the participants, this sort of identification originated online, as no other media outlet or social gathering really allowed them to be conveniently situated simultaneously within both communities. In the contemporary Israeli society, they are still, to a large extent, viewed as “others,” and their place of origin is viewed as the state of the enemy. In Iran, they are unwelcomed as Israeli citizens, and are not recognized as a part of the ethnic community. Online, users can carve not only their belonging to these two nations, but can also become central and dominant in them, embodying a bridge, a place of importance for their expertise in the two cultures.

Thus, the communal Persian identity, originated and maintained online, has a very primary essence for the community members. It is not just a memory, just the nostalgia, or the longing. It is the lived ethnicity, the lived experience that is constantly constructed and enacted by community members, for the first time, like in no other media outlet. At the same time, for community members who were not born in Iran, and experience ethnicity as it is passed to them from their parents and grandparents, this is somewhat a first encounter with a Persian identity that is celebrated publicly, allowing identification beyond the political reality in Israel. Some of the participants describe it as being “re-born” into their own identity. This view of the online sphere, and the way Iran and Israel are intertwined into the Persian identity challenges the primordial notion of a

homeland, and help us to unpack the problematic use of the term homeland to describe a place of birth.

An online homeland is not only an imagined community in the way Anderson describes it, as it is not about Iran or Israel's wish to create national sense and build national subjects. This is the voluntary discussion of media users, which produce their own sense of belonging. I do not argue that social constructions and cultural influences lose their role or centrality in this process. I do stress, however, that the starting point of the process is not the state or its mainstream tools of production (media, maps, census, museums), but rather the online user and online group that promote their dual sense of identification. This is also not only a community of sentiment, as users create and share media content rather than just consuming content produced for them. It is the expansion of the imagined community and the community of sentiment into online spheres. Into a new sphere in which media users have simultaneously more control over media content creation and consumption, and less obligations to bounded physical places. It is the sphere in which form, content, and language are blended to answer the cultural needs of a marginalized community caught between two states.

This online homeland, does not replace offline homelands, but it allows users to challenge the mainstream perception of the homeland. In it, members distinct between the state (the place, the government, and the social constructions these form) and the nation (the culture and the people, as well as the social construction these form and experience). In this sphere, users navigate sense of belonging and longing for two places and two cultures they view as their homelands. Online, they reconcile a sentiment for

both their place of origin (which in the Jewish context considered as a host land) and the new locality (Israel – “The” homeland). Both offline states that are brought into this online sphere are imagined in the sense that they are based on members’ ability to position themselves as central players in both societies. At the same time, they both make this online homeland a real and important sphere for members of the community, who are enabled with a place to call their own.

The enclave media usage portrayed in this ethnographic account is performed away from the public eye, yet to some extent maintains dominant cultural constructions and oppressions. It also invites us to look at a process of civic deliberation between minorities and dominant cultures and between Israel and Iran. Media allow citizens to create civic discussions and negotiations, drawing on cultural similarities and past memories of the relations between the states. These negotiations are able to transcend the diplomatic clash between Iran and Israel, as well as between minority groups and dominant groups within Israel, giving hope for new social, political, and cultural practices and opportunities within Israel and between Israel and Iran.

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